

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

2006

Stitching orality into the textual quilt in Derek Walcott's Omeros

Judith Bledsoe

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

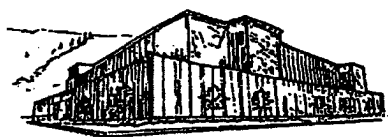
Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Bledsoe, Judith, "Stitching orality into the textual quilt in Derek Walcott's Omeros" (2006). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 3673.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3673>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.



**Maureen and Mike
MANSFIELD LIBRARY**

The University of
Montana

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety,
provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited
in published works and reports.

****Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature****

Yes, I grant permission

X

No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature: JOINTH BLED SOE

Date: 5.25.06

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken
only with the author's explicit consent.

Stitching Orality into the Textual Quilt
in Derek Walcott's Omeros

by

Judith Bledsoe

B.A. Pepperdine University, 2000

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

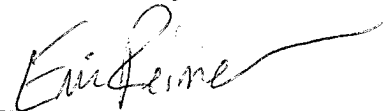
for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

May 2006

Approved by:



Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

5-26-06

Date

UMI Number: EP35761

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP35761

Published by ProQuest LLC (2012). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

Stitching Orality into the Textual Quilt in Derek Walcott's Omeros

Chairperson: Eric Reimer 

"This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles," Derek Walcott tells us. "Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary." Walcott's own work assembles the fragments of language and culture from Africa, Asia and Europe that come together in the Caribbean. In Walcott's 1990 tour de force, Omeros, he pieces together diverse cultural components into a sort of textual quilt.

This project explores the fragments of orality in the text and the places where orality and writing overlap. In sewing orality into his text, Walcott responds to the literary movement of 'orality' within West Indian poetry that seeks to express uniquely Caribbean sensibilities through its oral Creole languages. During Walcott's career as a playwright and poet in the West Indies, the notion of using orality in literature became a highly influential movement that played a substantial role in shaping the literatures of the Caribbean.

In Omeros, shreds of orality are sewn throughout: they appear in the colorful ways in which Walcott uses animism that reflect oral perceptions of reciprocity; they are threaded through the oral cultures of Africa, the Caribbean and North America; they show up in the patches of Caribbean Creoles in the text's dialogue; they are stitched across the work as various forms of the paradigmatic oral poet, Homer; and they are embroidered with words shaped by the physical context of the Caribbean. Walcott's triumph in Omeros is incorporating the fragments of language that he inherits from a variety of sources into an expression of love for his native island, St Lucia, using an aesthetic inspired by sensorial engagement with the Antillean natural world.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
African Animism in Caribbean Identity.....	10
Omeric Orality.....	35
Walcott's 'New World' Language.....	58
Conclusions.....	79
Notes.....	84
Works Cited.....	89

An Introduction

In Derek Walcott's acceptance speech for the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature, he celebrates the diverse cultural and linguistic presences that come together in the Caribbean. He envisions art in the archipelago as tenderly piecing broken fragments together to form a cohesive whole with seams still revealing lines of fracture as well as the patience and love involved in its mending. "This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles," Walcott tells us. "Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary." His own work assembles the fragments of language and culture from Africa, Asia and Europe that mingle in the Caribbean. In Walcott's 1990 tour de force, Omeros, he stitches together diverse cultural components into a sort of textual quilt. For this ambitious book in verse, Walcott's native island of St. Lucia foregrounds Caribbean cultural experiences in the place that first shaped his poetic sensibility.

Most of the main characters in Omeros live in contemporary St. Lucia. Omeros revolves around a series of fairly commonplace events described in such poetic transcendence that a synopsis does little justice. With that said, the story follows two fishermen, Achille and Hector, who both love the same woman named Helen. Another Lucian fisherman, Philoctete, bears a wound on his shin that refuses to heal. The café owner, Ma Kilman, eventually aids the injured Philoctete by using an herbal brew that she concocts with the aid of animist gods and the communication of ants. In another narrative thread, the ex-colonial

Englishman, Major Dennis Plunkett, and his wife, Maud, run a pig farm on St. Lucia. Helen works for the pair briefly and she inspires Dennis to record the history of St. Lucia--also known as the Helen of the West Indies due to the protracted battle between the French and English over ownership--which ultimately fails because "in her head of ebony / there was no real need for the historian's / remorse, nor for literature's" (271). Walcott himself appears as a major character in the text. He also works meta-textually as the author self-reflexively examining his own artistic craft and his motives for abstracting Helen--both as a woman and as figuratively representative of the island--into a metaphor of history or literature. It seems that even though "Helen" doesn't need Plunkett's history or Walcott's literature, the author needs a venue to express a love for his native island and does so through the course of the book. Omeros is ultimately a love poem to the Caribbean, generally, though one particularly dedicated to the island of St. Lucia.

The pieces of St. Lucia's language and culture assembled into Omeros come from a history of Amerindian inhabitants, colonial occupation and postcolonial sovereignty. Originally the home of peaceful Aruac (Arawak) people, their Carib neighbors took over the island by about 800 AD. The British arrived in 1605 and the French officially bought the island in 1651. In 1659, tensions between the British and French erupted over ownership disputes. This began over 150 years of conflict played out in St. Lucia between these two European nations. St. Lucia changed hands 14 times between the French and

British during this time. The French ceded St. Lucia to Great Britain in 1814. The British, in turn, finally granted self-sovereignty to St. Lucia in 1979. The assortment of culture and language that exists on St. Lucia comes from traces of Amerindian, pieces of French and English, fragments brought from Africa and Asia by slaves and indentured servants and the Creole languages spoken by the majority of St Lucian citizens.

In the 'textual quilt' that Walcott pieces together in Omeros, he stitches in patches of oral language found in the Caribbean. These oral shreds include African languages and animism, the oral poet Homer, and the oral nature of Creole languages that exist in the Antilles. In sewing orality into his text, Walcott responds to the literary movement of 'orality' within West Indian poetry that emphasizes the expression of uniquely Caribbean sensibilities through its Creole languages. The Creoles of the Caribbean emerged from plantation societies formed when a small group of rather homogenous Europeans subjugated a large and linguistically diverse population of African slaves. The Creole languages born from this cultural contact included both European and African elements. Today, Creoles are the first languages of the majority of people in the Caribbean. Caribbean writers such as Kamau Braithwaite, Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant incorporate Creole into their work to celebrate the orality, ethnic diversity, heterogeneous languages and particular circumstances of the Caribbean islands. These writers elevate Creole's status within literature and highlight the oral components of Caribbean language. During Walcott's career

as a playwright and poet in the West Indies, the notion of using orality in literature became a highly influential movement that played a substantial role in shaping the literatures of the Caribbean.

Early in his career, Walcott famously disagreed with Braithwaite¹ regarding the movement of orality in Caribbean literature that began in the 1950's. Two other movements framed the literary movement toward orality: the political movement toward independence from colonialism and the social movement of Black Power. When Caribbean artists and intelligentsia began to privilege oral Creole languages and emphasize cultural and linguistic ties to African cultures³, their aesthetic reflected the politics of independence and Black Power's cultural identification with Africa. Walcott took issue with orality's emphasis on correlations with African² oral cultures, the glorification of peasant or folk culture by urban intellectuals and orality's shift toward insular national languages that accompanied the politics of independence in the region. The issues at stake in orality⁴ were continuously debated, but its aesthetic undoubtedly altered West Indian poetry's embrace of African elements and Creole languages. In this highly politicized arena of language, literature and independence, Walcott's resistance to orality created a tension with Braithwaite, whose trilogy The Arrivants (1967, 1968 and 1969) forcefully propelled the aesthetic of orality in West Indian literature. The Jamaican author, Vic Reid, in his 1949 book New Day and the Trinidadian Sam Selvon's Brighter Sun in 1952 also pioneered the literary use of Creole. In reality, Walcott and Braithwaite

were never entirely opposed and at present their notions of orality overlap substantially. Walcott wrote many plays in Creole for oral performance throughout his career, such as The Sea at Dauphin (1954) and Branch of the Blue Nile (1986). He increasingly adopted African elements in his work as his career progressed, as seen in his play Dream on Monkey Mountain (1967) and clearly expressed in Omeros. Though Walcott resists a sense of politics controlling aesthetics, he also makes a politicized language choice. While political agendas for independence from colonialism guided the orality movement, Walcott's choice to write in English reveals his own investment in European structures.

As a primarily spoken language, Creole presents various challenges for writers. Walcott tries to avoid the overly academic exercise of orthography that tries to represent Creole verbatim. In his essay "The Muse of History," Walcott discusses his predicament of writing in Creole:

Today, still in many islands, the West Indian poet is faced with a language which he hears but cannot write because there are no symbols for such a language and because the closer he brings hand and word to the precise inflections of the inner language and to the subtlest accuracies of his ear, the more chaotic his symbols will appear on the page, the smaller the regional dialect, the more eccentric his representation of it will become, so his function remains the old one of being filter and purifier, never losing the tone and strength of the common speech as he uses the hieroglyphs, symbols, or alphabet of the official one. (49)

This quote reveals one major paradox which precludes the full reconciliation of writing and orality: orality exists in a world of sound while writing exists in a predominantly visual world. Walcott realizes the havoc of attempting to directly translate a sound-based system into visual symbols. Instead of recording Creole

literally, he attempts to sublimate the sounds and rhythms of St Lucia's spoken language in words written mostly in English. He tries to incorporate spoken aspects of Creole into a written form accessible to Anglophone readers.

Although Omeros is necessarily mediated through writing, Walcott works *toward* written poetics shaped by the direct sensorial engagement of orality. As David Abram reveals in The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World, oral cultures tend to have an open circuit of perception with the non-human world that allows animism to be a lived reality experienced through the senses. "In multiple and diverse ways," Abram says, "taking a unique form in each indigenous culture, spoken language seems to give voice to, and thus to enhance and accentuate, the sensorial affinity between humans and the environing earth" (71). Oral cultures tend to access a much wider field of speakers in their reciprocity with the "more-than-human world." Thus, animism reflects oral worldviews that more readily recognize non-human articulation.

The term 'animism' has accumulated many shades of meaning. The traditional definition of animism is a belief in the existence of spirits inhabiting natural objects and phenomena. David Abram structures a much more delicate argument for animism in terms of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of phenomenology. Abram extends Merleau-Ponty's philosophical framework⁵ into an analysis of how oral cultures perceive and interact with their surroundings:

By asserting that perception, phenomenologically considered, is inherently participatory, we mean that perception always involves, at its most intimate level, the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives. Prior to all our verbal reflections, at the level of our spontaneous, sensorial engagement with the world around us, we are *all* animists (57).

In Merleau-Ponty's view, perception involves the participation of separate entities in an active relationship. The sensing human body interacts with a field of animate presences. Abram focuses on the heightened abilities of oral cultures to perceive this animate communication. In oral communities, he argues, human voices participate with an articulate natural world.

Many nuances of the term 'animism' are useful in relation to Omeros. The traditional understanding of animism as gods or spirits inhabiting nature specifically applies to the Aruac and African gods presented in the text. Abram's usage--that oral cultures tend to have an open reciprocity with an animate world that speaks to them--more properly describes Walcott's poetic development of a written code based in orality. His inclusion of orality in writing is interesting, and problematic, on several levels. To begin, Abram explains that the introduction of writing tends to silence animism. He argues that while oral peoples engage in a participatory dialog with their articulate local surroundings, readers transfer animation to written words.

If we no longer experience the enveloping earth as expressive and alive, this can only mean that the animating interplay of the senses has been transferred to another medium, another locus of participation. It is the written text that provides this new locus. For to read is to enter into a profound participation, or chiasm, with the inked marks upon the page. (131)

Thus, the active engagement of oral cultures with a field of animate presences changes to a relationship with writing in scribal cultures. Abram identifies the interaction of reading as a subtle form of animism in itself--words become expressive and alive for a reader--yet, sadly, reading often becomes the *only* form of animism accepted by literate societies. Writing has the effect of silencing nature: "For our senses are now coupled, synaesthetically, to these printed shapes as profoundly as they were once wedded to cedar trees, ravens, and the moon" (138). As explained by Abram, animism can reconnect literacy to a sense of orality. The "profound participation" of reading written words might offer generative possibilities for reconnecting language to the animate non-human world. In Omeros, Walcott's layered textual work *begins* to reverse the silencing shift of literacy by incorporating animism that speaks through his writing.

Inevitably, certain questions arise regarding the limitations and contradictions in using orality in a written text. Can writing, the very technology that occludes animistic dialog, be effectively used to reopen that discourse? How far can a literate poet, such as Walcott, actually take an oral aesthetic? Can a written text ever fully express the sound-dominated qualities of orality? How problematic is Walcott's use of orality given that he writes in English and draws heavily from the European canon? To what extent can writing and orality overlap? Oral and scribal cultures diverge in many ways. In Walter Ong's scholarly work, Orality and Literacy, he describes fundamental differences in

worldview, style, awareness, expression, sense of time and participation with environment. Given the disparities between scribal and oral cultures, finding a middle ground that uses writing to reorient readers to animate presences might be unachievable. Yet, examining the struggle to do so in Omeros reveals how these two systems might overlap in productive and creative ways. In Walcott's attempts to build imaginative bridges between two worldviews, he reaches for a certain poetic inclusion of orality without asserting complete success.

Walcott integrates orality into Omeros by using a variety of tactics that explore the shared territory between orality and writing. As Walcott tells his fellow Caribbean writer in "Letter to Chamoiseau": 'We shall create a literature which will obey all the demands of modern writing while taking roots in the traditional configurations of our orality' (Twilight 224). To begin this task of overlapping orality and writing, Walcott uses animism in a variety of forms; he weaves the narrative threads of Omeros through oral cultures in Africa, the Caribbean and North America; he integrates Caribbean Creoles into the text's dialogue; he tries to achieve a more sensuously direct and participatory relationship between words and their referents; and he focuses centrally on the figure of Homer. Homer's presence poignantly overlaps scribal and oral material. Walcott plays with these points of intersection between orality and literacy in Omeros. The oral territory of Homer, animism and Creole infuse Walcott's written form with a sense of orality.

“She touched both worlds with her rainbow”:

African Animism in Caribbean Identity

In Omeros, Walcott engages African animism from a diasporic position of recovery. He uses an African sea-swift, trees, ants, and the Afro-Caribbean practice of obeah to reconnect Caribbean cultural identity with an African antecedent in orality and animism. He creatively manipulates a narrative that interfaces with an African presence without falling into essentialist traditions of a recoverable African origin. Instead, Walcott uses layers of animist symbolism in Omeros to show the African intersections of continuity and rupture within Caribbean identity. In the text, Africa is more than a potent signifier for displacement and dislocation. Recovering a sense of Africa’s oral cultures and animist beliefs offers a place-bound, land-embedded agency for the New World. Walcott’s text points to an antecedent in African animism and oral traditions that transfer to the new locality of St. Lucia.

A violent rupture occurred for many people in St. Lucia between a distant African past and their Caribbean present. Slavery scattered many indigenous African tribes who had maintained strongly land-embedded cultural identities and tribal histories that were continually re-articulated by oral storytellers. Stuart Hall imagines an axis of continuity and rupture in Caribbean cultural identity: a vertical line grounds identity in cohesion with the past while an intersecting horizontal plane “reminds us that what we share is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity: the peoples dragged into slavery,

transportation, colonization, migration" (237). For Hall, these two opposing forces delineate the contours of the African presence within Caribbean identity: displacement brought diverse peoples together in the Caribbean while simultaneously distancing them from their previous histories and identities. While certainly not everybody in the Caribbean can directly relate to an African presence within their own identity, Hall insists that "everyone in the Caribbean, of whatever ethnic background, must sooner or later come to terms with this African presence. Black, brown, mulatto, white – all must look *Présence Africaine* in the face, speak its name" (241). The social and historical influence of Africa contributes to the cultural dynamic that everyone in the West Indies experiences on some level.

Hall's model is valuable for investigating the weighty presence of Africa within the text of *Omeros* and examining the metaphoric intersections between continuity and discontinuity using animist symbols such as the African sea-swift. This bird is emblematic of the shifting vertices between Hall's axes framing Caribbean cultural identity. She concurrently functions as a guide and omen for recovering and maintaining African presence within Caribbean identity along the vector of continuity and symbolizes diasporic movement in her travels along the vector of difference and rupture. The sea-swift also symbolizes syncretism between animism and Christianity: she provides continuity with traditional African gods while simultaneously overseeing cultural rupture when those deities are sacrificed and given Christian baptisms.

Traditional African religions perceive a universe filled with visible and invisible spirits including a supreme spiritual being, a number of lesser spirits, human beings and nature. Animism is built into an indigenous African religious view that acknowledges spirits pervading the universe, "African religion, which has been so profoundly formative in Caribbean spiritual life, is precisely *different* from Christian monotheism in believing that God is so powerful that he can only be known through a proliferation of spiritual manifestations, present everywhere in the natural and social world" (Hall 238). For many African slaves forced to adopt Christianity in the Caribbean, their animist beliefs in a multitude of spirits occupying natural phenomena transformed into a hybrid religious form incorporating both belief systems. This religious syncretism is a powerful example of the creolized nature of Caribbean life. The African sea-swift seems emblematic of Caribbean religious hybridity; she represents part of the animate universe associated with traditional African religions while symbolizing Christian iconography.

At the beginning of Omeros, the sea-swift appears in the sky formerly occupied by the laurier-cannelle trees that were cut down to make fishing canoes. The men reluctantly sacrificed the ancient tree gods out of economic necessity. It took some strong white rum to embolden this deicide: "it gave us the spirit to turn into murderers" (3). A fisherman, Achille, looks up at the sky and glimpses the swift, "He saw the hole silently healing with the foam / of a cloud like a breaker. Then he saw the swift / crossing the cloud-surf, a small thing, far from

its home, / confused by the waves of blue hills. [...] With his cutlass he made / a swift sign of the cross, his thumb touching his lips while the height rang with axes" (6). The sea-swift's presence in St. Lucia far from her African home, her crisscrossing "signature" and Achille's "swift sign of the cross" provide a syncretic blessing for the fishermen who are ashamed of killing the old animist gods. She seems to self-reflexively bless Walcott's hybrid project as well. Like the fisherman chopping down trees to build watercraft, Walcott's craft, "ribbed in our native timber" (323), also uses the elements of St. Lucia. Walcott's written craft dislodges language from an island to float out into the larger world.

Metaphorically, Walcott harvests local elements in order to make his livelihood as an international author. Meta-textually, he observes that "the I is a mast; a desk is a raft / for one, foaming with paper, and dipping the beak / of a pen in its foam, while an actual craft / carries the other to cities where people speak / a different language" (291). Like a tree nurtured with the island's elements and then released into the ocean as a canoe, Walcott roots his writing in localism and then moves his craft out across the sea to a worldwide reading audience. The sea-swift's continuing presence as a binding force between entities symbolizes his struggle to bring disparate parts together in one craft. The sea-swift reminds us that Walcott's syncretic style borrows symbols and meanings from diverse sources and attempts to provide continuity between local specificity and a global market.

The sea-swift affirms and blesses the fishermen caught in fractured position between animism and Christianity as she hovers over the site where the animism of indigenous religion clashes with the capitalism associated with Christianity. "These were their pillars that fell, leaving a blue space / for a single God where the old gods stood before" (5). This scene opens a discussion of the larger material consequences that often accompany Christianity. Through colonialism, indigenous peoples largely encountered Christianity within a capitalist context to such an extent that the two ideologies are inextricable. In this situation, the economic realities of the fishermen force them to kill trees they recognize as gods. Walcott correlates the loss of trees with the destruction caused by European capitalism. In cutting down the tree gods to make canoes, the trees symbolically become the decimated Aruac people that originally inhabited St. Lucia. The indigenous Aruac language evolved from direct interaction with St. Lucia, but now their language only exists in smoky traces. The trees and the Aruacs silently endure the destruction of their bodies and words:

The bearded elders endured the decimation / of their tribe without uttering a syllable / of that language they had uttered as one nation, / the speech taught their saplings: from the towering babble / of the cedar to green vowels of bois-campeche [...] the Aruacs' patois crackled in the smell / of a resinous bonfire that turned the leaves brown / with curling tongues, then ash, and their language was lost. (6)

The traces of Aruac language and culture pulled into Omeros begin to resurrect their importance in St. Lucia in a fragmentary way, but their extinction can't be

reversed. St. Lucia inherits only pieces of Aruac language and bits of their culture. Walcott seeks to recover a language of cultural sensibility tuned to St. Lucia's geography that was lost with the Aruac language. Their repeated representation as trees brings to mind the exploitation of natural resources that often accompanied imperialism. The Aruac, so closely affiliated with the trees of their island, are representative of the millions of Amerindians that died in the process of extracting the materially profitable assets of their environment. The repetitive tree metaphors conflate human and non-human existence to bring attention to their interdependence and common susceptibility to destruction.

The sea-swift's arrival on the scene allows the main character, Achille, to carry on with this sacrifice that simultaneously engages him with animism and Christianity. As Achille hollows out the laurier-cannelle trees into canoes, he feels them exhale to touch the sea. The trees transform from their formerly land-rooted existence bound to a single place into a new identity of water-based transport. As the crafts are launched, the doubly symbolic sign of the swift anoints them, "The priest / sprinkled them with a bell, then he made the swift's sign" (8). Then the priest smiles at the 'misspelled' name of Achille's canoe, 'In God We Troust', which prompts a reprisal from Achille, "Leave it! Is God' spelling and mine" (8). This name follows the synergetic theme by combining the Christian God with a capital G, the assonance of 'Troust' with "the canoes entered the *troughs* / of the surpliced shallows" (8; my emphasis), and the replication of a phrase so tied to capitalism by its appearance on U.S. money

since 1864. Ironically, the canoes' Christian baptism into water returns them to their animist beginnings: "The logs gathered that thirst / for the sea which their own vined bodies were born with" (7). The animist associations involved in the priest's sign of the sea-swift and in the trees' willingness to become canoes contribute to an overall sense of blending animism with Christianity to create a Creole worldview adapted to the particular circumstances of this fictive St. Lucian community.

The African sea-swift's cross-like signature both conjures multiple levels of meaning and carries enormous symbolic potency. The \perp and its tilted version, the X, appear with frequency throughout Omeros. In addition to visually suggesting Hall's axes of Caribbean identity, the sea-swift's \perp resembles one of the most powerful Christian images: a sweeping Catholic gesture of the cross. A Christian cross co-opted by a bird points to African animism assimilating Christian iconography on its own terms. For those people of St. Lucia with ancestors displaced from African homes to New World plantations, the sea-swift's body metaphorically joins together the psychic continuity of African animism with the rupture of assimilating into a society based in Christianity.

The sea-swift's signature is one of many examples of natural writing in the text that further re-inscribes language into the land. The presence of non-human writing in Omeros reveals an intimate relationship between animism and writing that is a central element in Walcott's sense of orality. The connection between the sea-swift's writing in the sky and Walcott's own writing shows the

consubstantiality of human and non-human language by exploring the lost nexus between them. Walcott's poetics attempt to overlap with the language of the sea-swift that oral peoples more directly translate due to their practical experience of listening to nature in a participatory relationship. Other examples of natural writing peppered throughout the text include: "eels sign their names" (4), "the bird whose wing's wrote the word" (159), "sparrows are tagging notes" (182), "read the calligraphy of swallows" (183) and "the crab's lifted pincer with its pen like the sea-dipping swift" (295). In the space of a poem that permits possible meetings of human and natural language, he imaginatively translates the text of the animate world and seems to align his writing with the natural writing he witnesses.

The connection between animist writing and Walcott's poetics can also be seen as the sea-swift writes in hyphens across the sky. She stitches hemispheres and narratives together in a hyphen-like flight. Her flight seams together two disparate parts, two different worlds, two aspects of Caribbean identity just as Walcott attempts to bridge orality and writing, human and nature, the Old World and the New World. The hyphen is a sign shared between the sea-swift and the poet that reflects their overlapping attributes. An imaginary hyphen following the swift's flight charts a meandering course between the Old World and the New World. The hyphen suggests the in-between spaces that Walcott negotiates. Hyphens can occupy the space between two words, two worlds, and

two covers of a book. Even the sea-swift's own name is hyphenated. Her travels sew pieces of text and globe together in a thread-line of hyphens:

I followed a sea-swift to both sides of this text; / her hyphen stitched its seam, like the interlocking / basins of a globe in which one half fits the next into an equator, both shores neatly clicking / into a globe; except that its meridian was not North and South but East and West [...] Her wing-beat carries these islands to Africa / she sewed the Atlantic rift with a needle's line, / the rift in the soul. (319)

Between the words and worlds of Afro-Caribbean, the sea-swift binds together disparate cultural identities divided by the hyphen of meridian. She connects the Old World--geographic as well as temporal in relation to Caribbean identity--with the New World where Caribbean spatial presence and temporal present exists.

In order for Achille to investigate the African presence in his cultural identity, she traverses time and space to bring Achille from the New World back to the Old. During a moment of sunstroke, Achille questions his identity for the first time. After pondering the question of his origins, the sea-swift lures him to an Africa of the past: "She touched both worlds with her rainbow, this frail dancer / leaping the breakers, this dart of the meridian" (130). He follows the sea-swift in his canoe towards Africa, reversing history and the Middle Passage route. Stuart Hall recognizes the importance of retracing the route home to Africa. Though the past cannot be recovered or reversed, metaphorically traveling backwards restores forgotten connections to an African identity, "These symbolic journeys are necessary for us all—and necessarily circular. This is the

Africa we must return to—but ‘by another route’: what Africa has become in the New World, what we have made of ‘Africa’: ‘Africa’ as we retell it through politics, memory, and desire” (242). Achille’s return allows him to reconcile his past with his present by dreaming a possible history. In Africa, Achille is “out looking for his name and his soul” (154). He needs this information to flesh out his sense of identity and the sea-swift guides him ‘home.’ Although his dream journey cannot change the past, this redemptive return empowers his present cultural identity. Achille’s journey also opens up a dynamic space within the text for voicing what was lost in the transition and translation from Africa to the New World.

On his dream journey, Achille experiences the unity of his ancestral community and then the trauma of slavery’s rupture. Achille becomes a slave forced to migrate with the others taken from villages all over Africa who are brought together through displacement. He witnesses the severing of culture, place, language, religion and humanity on the slave ship. The slaves’ cultural identities are cut away from their roots and their names and place-based languages are altered during the brutal transition into slavery. Walcott uses an ongoing motif of trees to represent displaced and dispossessed peoples: “So now they were coal, firewood, dismembered / branches, not men” (150). The passage to the New World sundered these slaves from place-bound languages and animist gods linked to local sensibility. Their synaesthetic language falls away

when they lose contact with the surroundings that created those words and gods from sounds intrinsic to specific places:

It was only later / that they talked to the gods who had not been there / when they needed them. Their whole world was moving / or a large part of the world, and what began dissolving / was the fading sound of their tribal name for the rain, / the bright sound for the sun / a hissing noun for the river, / and always the word 'never,' and never the word 'again.' (152)

The surroundings that influenced their language-shaping exist in a different world, an Old World. The words that describe the sound of rain, the brightness of the sun, and the hissing noise of the river are left behind.

Walcott describes the loss of languages and crafts as particularly tragic outcomes of the slave trade. He uses his own poetic craft to mourn the lost crafts of the artisan, the armourer, the potter and the painter. The loss of craft reflects a larger loss of identity wrapped up in one's work and language. For Walcott, work, language and identity are especially intertwined, "Since Walcott's own craft is poetry, the lost belief that the forms of language bear a necessary relation to the world is for him the most grievous casualty of the African diaspora" (Terada 28). As the trees metamorphosed from a rooted existence into a new craft, Walcott optimistically offers hope that the slaves' crafts can be altered into new forms. For those who lived through the passage, transformations are still possible and a new language can be shaped from a new place. They are epic survivors, "But they crossed, they survived. There is the epical splendor" (149). The displacing experience of the slave ship sadly renders makers unable to make,

languages lost from lack of direct referents and identities split from the tribe's collective history. The institution of slavery cut people from their local places like trees felled and transported, but their mere survival opens possibilities for generations to come in the New World.

In a sense, their survival enabled Walcott's own existence. With slave ancestors on both sides of his family, Walcott reclaims a sense of language that his forebears were forced to abandon. Like the African languages that had a "bright sound for the sun," he tries to root his poetic craft in the vocal gesticulations and natural intonations inherent to the West Indies. His words move closer to their referents by using the very sounds that inspired language, though fixing words in writing necessarily changes the terms of usage.

Curiously, he uses writing to undermine the displacing effects of writing.

Abram explains that alphabetic writing is detrimental to the place-specific and locally-embedded identities of oral cultures. "First," he says, "reading and writing, as a highly concentrated form of participation, displaces the older participation between the human senses and the earthly terrain [...] Second, writing down the ancestral stories disengages them from particular places" (185).

Walcott tries to reawaken a reciprocal interaction between senses and surroundings in his poetics. His written words reach toward specifically local sensibilities mediated through the senses rather than the generalized globalism of technology.

In the vein of West Indian oral poetics, Walcott excavates the influence of sound in spoken words beneath the abstractions and conventions of writing. In “Letter to Chamoiseau,” Walcott explains the resonance of sound and sensual experience he seeks in language:

The word *gommier*, for example, translated into ‘gum tree,’ is not only the tree itself but also the dugout canoe manufactured by the indigenous Caribs; and as the tree, its sounds contain the activity of a light breeze in the gum tree’s boughs or branches; ‘boughs,’ however, is archaic, containing a mild assonance – ‘gommier,’ ‘boughs’ – but it is so right a sound for the Carib canoe in its buoyancy and elegant length, its riding and shearing of water, the carved trunk of the floating tree and the blue echo around the word. (225)

He tries to float the deep sounds and meanings of words up to the surface with poetic concision, “I wanted large green words to lie waxen on / the page’s skin, floating but rooted in its lymph” (*Omeros* 266). Recovering deep meanings necessarily entails traveling an oral route through animism. Before the word ‘gommier’ was written, it was first spoken to describe a specific tree animated by a “light breeze in the gum tree’s boughs.” That sound rendered the word into existence through a participatory exchange between humans and their environment. Human and non-human languages both share roots in gesture, performance and interaction. The vocal gestures of the world inspired the words that describe local sensibilities in an oral culture. Transmitting oral traces of sound in writing remains West Indian orality’s desired goal.

Orality and animism generate a placed-based specificity of language that nonetheless changes when the words are written down and dislodged from their

original referents. Writing separates a word used to describe particular phenomena from its original context because it can be read at a distance of time and space. No matter how close Walcott's word choice might be to the original referent, it still operates on the level of written detachment for the reader. He just heightens the sensorial connection between a particular place and the language used to represent it. In examples such as 'gommier,' Walcott writes orality back into the specific space of the Caribbean where the word was produced, though by doing so he inevitably detaches the word from its context.

This motion of words from a specific context out into the world follows the aesthetic of motion in Omeros. Walcott works with the tension between fixity and motion in multivalent ways. Though fixed geographically, oral language exists in the movement of sounds. Conversely, written language exists in a fixed format on the page but can easily move away from its original location. Like the oral language rooted in St. Lucia, the laurier-cannelle trees once existed in a fixed location but become canoes moving in the primordial flux of the sea. Though the trees' transformation into mobile canoes ends positively, Walcott also describes very negative effects from removing trees from their indigenous locations. At different points in the text, Walcott interchanges various cultures with trees and leaves that are displaced, raked and burned. He describes the Native American experience of dispossession and displacement of tribes like uprooted trees:

the tribes moving like trees / downhill to the lowland, a flag-fading
 smoke-wisp estranges / them. / First men then the forests. Until the earth
 / lies barren as the dusty Dakotas. Men take their colours / as the trees
 do from the native soil of their birth, / and once they are moved
 elsewhere, entire cultures / lose the art of mimicry, and then, where the
 trees were, / the fir, the palm, the olive, the cedar, a desert place / widens
 in the heart. This is the first wisdom of Caesar, / to change the ground
 under the bare soles of a race. (207-8)

This passage rings with the trauma of losing place-based identification. The “colours” of the land that shape communities and define individuals fade in the displacement to a different geographic context. In this example, the transition from fixity to movement ends very badly. The imperial practice of cutting people from their roots dislocates them from their tribal memory linked with the land. Using Caesar as an archetype of empire, Walcott recounts the tragedy of dislocating people from their homes and histories by imperial structures of domination and extermination.

The movement of African peoples across the Atlantic into lives of servitude fixed in plantations left a wounding legacy that residually afflicts Walcott’s fictional St Lucian community. The explicitly wounded characters in the text range from the ex-colonial figure of Major Plunkett to the fisherman named Philoctete. These two characters represent descendents of the colonizer and the colonized, respectively. Plunkett’s wound comes from fighting for the British army during World War II against Rommel’s Afrika Korps. He sustained a head injury which registers dually as a literal head wound and a wounded mental state. Walcott explains that “He has to be wounded, affliction is one

theme / of this work" (28). Philoctete has a cut on his shin that physically manifests the wound of forced diaspora into slavery. An anchor caused the laceration, but Philoctete believes his shin represents the pain of his ancestors. "He believed the swelling came from the chained ankles / of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure? / the cross he carried was not only the anchor's / but that of his race, for a village black and poor" (19). Like a text, Philoctete's body shows the lingering horror of slavery--the anchor a reminder of ships in the Middle Passage--and the economic realities of a poor village. His injured body externalizes the ongoing pain his community experiences as a result of the economic and social imbalances instigated by colonialism and continued by structures such as tourism that propagate a "poverty-guaranteed tour" (57). The Greek character of Philoctetes--of Homer's Odyssey and Sophocles' play--suffers a painful snake bite on his foot which results in his abandonment on the island of Lemnos and later rescue in order to win the Trojan War⁶. This classical figure of a wounded man left behind who holds the key to a group's success translates to Walcott's depiction of a St Lucian Philoctete. His wound shows how the pain of the past continues to encumber the present. The suffering of his ancestors continues to afflict him and several other characters in Walcott's St. Lucia hundreds of years later. Psychically, the wounds of both Plunkett and Philoctete affect the community that Walcott creates in this text and the healing of these two characters indicates that the larger community can be cured as well. "Even if the various healings in Omeros are individual," suggests Eric Reimer, "still this

epic, unlike its classical ancestors, centers around not one but multiple heroes. The author's hope seems to lie in a series of such individual awakenings and healings, whose sum eventually achieves a collective cure" (57). Both of these wounded men, and by extension the larger community, heal due to a woman named Ma Kilman performing a ritual based in African animism.

The St. Lucian café proprietor, Ma Kilman, re-opens an earth-bound affinity by using the Afro-Caribbean animist practice of obeah. Obeah is an Afro-Caribbean practice that uses herbal remedies and spiritual possession to cure ailments or enact some social resolution. Obeah was used by both men and women in the Caribbean as a form of resistance to the dehumanization of slavery and as an avenue to reconnect with Afro-centric ideology⁷. The practice's potential for harm made slave owners extremely wary⁸. Obeah women were particularly threatening because they tended to work in close proximity to the planters' homes. Though legal codes were introduced to halt the practice, obeah continued in the face of illegality. Loretta Collins's research on obeah uncovers the harsh penalties its practitioners faced: "Different laws, enacted by different regimes from 1792 through 1904 made conviction of the practice of obeah punishable, variously, by death, banishment, hard labor, whipping, or imprisonment" (148). Nonetheless, obeah persisted during the time of explicit illegality and continues to offer a rich connection to African spirituality in the West Indies today. The most famous obeah woman, Maroon Nanny, led in the First Maroon War against the English from 1720 to 1739. Her legacy comes from

her extraordinary military leadership, her powerful connection to obeah and her role as a wise woman preserving stories, songs and beliefs from Africa. She continues to be a Jamaican national hero and appears frequently in Caribbean literature⁹.

Ma Kilman manifests this rich Caribbean tradition of obeah in Omeros. Philoctete regularly appears at Ma Kilman's establishment, the No Pain Café, where she welcomes all. She gives him a jar of Vaseline every day to apply to the cut that refuses to heal. Psychically, the people of St. Lucia suffer alongside Philoctete and Plunkett and they share portions of the pain their ancestors either endured or inflicted during slavery. Walcott realizes that he shares this wound and this cure with Philoctete. "There was no difference / between me and Philoctete" (245). As a largely Creole culture, St. Lucians have hybrid heritages that position them awkwardly in-between blame and shame. In "The Muse of History" Walcott asks, "But who in the New World does not have a horror of the past, whether his ancestor was torturer or victim? Who, in the depth of conscience, is not silently screaming for pardon or revenge?" (39) It seems that Walcott himself bears this horror as a wound. These emotional wounds of slavery and imperialism are deeply complicated by the passage of time between generations. Something that occurred directly to one's ancestors now exists in traces several generations down the line. In the Caribbean, progenitors from various nations and races are mixed in myriad ways. There are pieces of cultural inheritance from many sources. While Omeros does not solve nor cure the actual

maladies of contemporary St. Lucia, the text offers a possible vision for a more humane existence. Walcott's position as a poet writing in English for a world-wide reading audience rather than in French patois (the language most St. Lucians actually speak) certainly complicates the issue. The direction in which he shares his vision, outward to the world instead of inward to his own island, further suggests a problematic situation. Though his position remains debatable, Walcott writes in his native language, English, and offers the world his vision of a more tolerant and compassionate existence.

To begin healing her diverse community that shares a burdened past, Ma Kilman reinstates her forgotten connection with an animate world. This enables her to act as an obeah woman who renews the culture's reciprocity with nature and its inherited African animism. During five o'clock Mass, Ma Kilman begins a litany of healing plants she remembers from her childhood. She searches her memory for the plant that will heal Philoctete but cannot locate it. On the church pew, a "frantic messenger" first attempts to catch Ma's attention with "desperate signs, its / oars lifted" (244). As she leaves the church, she moves from a Christian context, five o'clock Mass, directly into the animist Afro-Caribbean realm. She literally and figuratively leaves Christianity behind. Much like the African sea-swift, descriptions of Ma often combine aspects of animism and Christianity. She symbolically represents "the juxtaposition and coexistence of African-derived elements and Catholic symbols" (Olmos 4) in her close association with Catholicism while simultaneously acting as an obeah woman.

Ma Kilman taps into her animistic inheritance as she searches to find the flower that might heal Philoctete. She calls to the almost forgotten African deities--Erzulie, Shango and Orgun--gathered together within the healing flower, "all their power, / their roots, and their rituals were concentrated / in the whorled corolla of that stinking flower. / They were there. She called them" (242). Ants lead Ma Kilman from the church speaking her ancestral tribal tongue that reawakens African language within Ma Kilman and reconnects her to forgotten African deities. She uses obeah to decipher their animist language through a sort of trance. Ma takes down her hair, unbuttons "the small bone buttons of her church dress," and bends her head down so "her mossed skull heard / the ants talking the language of her great-grandmother, / the gossip of a distant market, and she understood, / the way we follow our thoughts without any language, / why the ants sent her this message to come to the wood" (243). The ants' language returns her to the tribal language of her grandmothers that was lost in the displacement of slavery. She follows the "vine of the generations of silent black workers" (244) from church to a sacred space in nature where she prays to the African gods for guidance. Her intuitive connection to obeah and its African roots allows her to translate the ant's communication. The language she recovers enables her to find a cure for Philoctete's wounded shin and spirit.

Throughout Omeros, ants are emblematic of a loss of humanity. Significantly, ant language aids the self-healing process by communicating a cure that begins to assuage the historical pain from losing humanity as slaves.

Walcott, as a self-reflexive character within the text, links Ma Kilman and his maternal African ancestors with ants: "See her there, my mother, my grandmother, my great-great- / grandmother. See the black ants of their sons, / their coal-carrying mothers" (245). Walcott's fictional community shares Philoctete's pain caused by the imperial practice of turning men and mothers into laboring ants. Ants conjure an image of labor-related and race-related servitude and Walcott specifically invokes black ants. When Walcott's father appears to him in ghost form and tells him to write for the women workers carrying coal to the cruise liner he observes that "they were darker and stronger, and their gait / was made beautiful by balance [...] the unending line crossing like ants without touching" (74). In *Omeros*, Walcott repeatedly returns to his childhood image of these beautiful coal-carrying women as ants, an image which influences his poetic form and content. The image reappears in Achille's dream-journey to Africa as he imagines the slaves like "ants arriving at the sea's rim, / or climbing the pyramids of coal and entering inside / the dark hold, far from this river and the griot's hymn" (146). Though beautiful in their tenacity and dignity, human features and futures collapse when servitude morphs people into working ants.

The culture in Walcott's created community begins to heal from a cure facilitated by ant communication. This healing starts with relocating African animism's language and agency within St. Lucia. Ma Kilman bathes Philoctete in the flower's brew and cures his pain. She functions as a figurative vehicle for the

island to begin healing itself through its own natural cure. Ma Kilman's animist intervention effects social change that helps the postcolonial islanders to re-envision their present identities. Walcott's character feels joy returning to his body as he experiences "the process, proof of a self-healing island / whose every cove was a wound, from the sibyl's art / renewed my rain-washed eyes. I felt an elation / opening and closing the valves of my paneled heart / like a book or a butterfly" (249). As the burden lifts from the island, Achille feels his past sorrow leaving, "when he'd weep in the window for their tribal shame, / A shame for the loss of words. And a language tired / of accepting that loss" (248). In a conversation with Seven Seas at the end of the text, Ma Kilman affirms: "We shall all heal" (319). Achille, Walcott and Philoctete release the psychic wound of slavery as healing begins from a cure offered up from the island itself. The healing of the various characters indicates a more widespread potential for positive change through natural engagement.

Ma Kilman's obeah extends to assist the ex-colonial character of Major Dennis Plunkett. His wounds are exacerbated when he loses his wife, Maud, to cancer. He comes to the No Pain Café seeking Ma Kilman's powerful ability to communicate across worlds. Like the African sea-swift's ability to cross time and space, Ma's power as an obeah woman enables her to transcend the boundaries of life. She goes into an obeah trance to find his wife in her afterlife. He asks, "Heaven?" and Ma responds, "Yes. If heaven is a green place" (307). The green place where Maud exists corresponds to her lifelong love of growing her garden.

At Maud's funeral, Walcott's fictional persona muses that "what I shared with his wife we shared as gardeners" (265). Her reciprocity with the animate field of St. Lucia is evidenced in her ability to reproduce the various birds of the island on a green quilt she works on for years before her death. Ma's obeah opens the door for Major Plunkett to talk with his wife. Ma tells him that Maud can hear him all the time. Her intervention acts as a catalyst for change in Major Plunkett's racial attitudes. The obeah of Ma Kilman emotionally connects the Major to the larger community of black islanders, "That moment bound him for good to another race" (307). After Ma's intervention, Plunkett also heals. Slowly, speaking to Maud ameliorates his head injury. Her presence helps him work through the pain that war and empire created in his psyche: "he forgot the war's / history that had cost him a son and a wife," and "he began to speak to the workmen / not as boys who worked with him, till every name / somehow sounded different" (309). Plunkett's wounds imply that he reconsiders his position as an agent of empire and violence. His past actions caused him pain. For him to heal, Plunkett finds equilibrium with the life around him. Maud's preference of "gardens to empires" (254) continues to guide him. There are many "wrongs" experienced by the afflicted characters of Plunkett, Achille and Walcott. It takes earth-rooted women to reconnect them with the green places, healing herbs and animistic language that can cure maladies.

Ma Kilman, the African sea-swift and black ants all contribute to the substantial African presence in Omeros. Both the sea-swift and the ants play critical roles in mending St. Lucia's damaged cultural identity with African elements: the sea-swift literally carries the cure from Africa and the ants' African language locates the cure. Ma Kilman recovers a healing potency using African-based language and religion that enables a positive affirmation of Caribbean identity. The text shows a substantial African presence balanced between pride and pain within Caribbean cultural identity. Omeros promotes an African tradition that enables Caribbean agency, but it also reveals the anguish and affliction of a shattered African history. Tradition and continuity co-exist with modernity and rupture in Omeros's African presence.

Walcott identifies a place-based agency inscribed within the Caribbean landscape. Walcott sees his native island as "self-healing coral" that can remake itself and grow from its wounds. He aligns St. Lucia's culture with its natural world "strong as self-healing coral, a quiet culture / is branching from the white ribs of each ancestor [...] from that coral and crystalline origin, a simply decent race broke from its various pasts" (297). This hybrid marine culture emerges stronger for its pain. Omeros de-centers the island's past of imperial degradation and opens an inclusive dialogue that embraces animism. The possibility he offers for participating with natural local elements can inspire real change in attitudes and actions. Walcott articulates a vision of his own archipelago that promotes reconciliation, preservation¹⁰ and appreciation of its natural

environment. His self-healing literature voices hope that the real St Lucia might overcome polarity without diminishing the value of its heterogeneity and find a way out of economic injustice without damaging its environment.

“O open this day with the conch’s moan, Omeros”: Omeric Orality

Walcott’s overarching aesthetic in Omeros celebrates a sense of piecing together the diverse forms found in the Caribbean. He explores the shared territory between writing and orality by using the figure of Homer—who has become an archetype for both traditions--as multiple characters in Omeros. Walcott’s use of Homeric material lingers in the space between orality and writing. Until the work of Harvard professor, Milman Parry, and his graduate assistant, Albert Lord, the Homeric epics were assumed to be written creations. Parry and Lord challenged the basic assumption that Homer wrote his epics. In the 1930’s, the two scholars traveled to Yugoslavia where they recorded poetry performed by Slavic singers still using the oral tradition of the Balkans. After comparing their recordings from Yugoslavia with the Homeric poems, they noticed striking similarities in metrical structure, formula and phrasing¹¹. Parry and Lord’s groundbreaking research began the comparative studies that now recognize the Iliad and the Odyssey as oral creations. “We now realize fully that Homer is an oral poet,” Lord explains. “This knowledge places Homer inside an oral tradition of epic song. He is not a split personality with half of his understanding and technique in the tradition and the other half in a Parnassus of literate methods. No, he is not even ‘immersed’ in the tradition. He *is* the tradition” (147). The archetypal Homer so esteemed, studied, written about and borrowed by literate cultures was an oral performer. Homer’s importance to

both written and oral cultures positions him in a shared zone between the two traditions.

The Homeric epics were flexible oral creations that constantly shifted and evolved until they were fixed by writing. They passed along accumulated knowledge through stories told from generation to generation. Ironically, these oral tales greatly influenced the spread of writing. Abram explains that writing down the Homeric epics both abetted writing's popularity and began to disconnect humans from their animate surroundings. He asserts that "in a culture as thoroughly and complexly oral as Greek culture in this period, the alphabet could take root only by allying itself, at first, with the oral tradition. Thus, the first large written texts to appear in Greece – namely, the Iliad and the Odyssey – are, paradoxically, 'oral texts'" (105). Abram's compelling argument in The Spell of the Sensuous links the dramatic change from orality to literacy with the severing of communication between the human and non-human worlds. He proposes that "it was only then, under the slowly spreading influence of alphabetic technology, that 'language' was beginning to separate itself from the animate flux of the world, and so becoming a ponderable presence in its own right" (107). When the Homeric epics first moved from fluid oral transmission to written fixity, they started losing their relation to immediate surroundings. The context lost importance as writing could be transferred anywhere and referred to at any time. In this way, writing tends to diminish the immediacy and

importance of physical backgrounds. Ong suggests that in oral cultures, words are inextricably connected to context:

The word in its natural, oral habitat is part of a real, existential present. Spoken utterance is addressed by a real, living person to other real, living persons, at a specific time in a real setting which includes always much more than mere words. Spoken words are always modifications of a total situation which is more than verbal. They never occur alone, in a context simply of words. (101)

Speakers communicate directly with others in an actual location while written texts often disengage readers from a place and isolate words from a living context. With the advent of writing, people started changing where they looked for information. Around the time when the Homeric epics were written down in the seventh century B.C.E, the animate interplay in oral cultures between humans and their natural environments began changing into a relationship that valorized writing to provide information, orientation and instruction (Abram 103-5).

As Walcott struggles to work in-between the worlds of writing and orality in Omeros, the effect is something like a palimpsest: a writing surface that still retains the traces of its earlier form. Thus, Walcott uses the areas where writing and orality converge, such as in the shared intellectual territory of Homer, to create a multi-layered record. His dynamic title figure, Omeros, bears traces of orality within his written character. He transforms the historical Homer into multiple representations with diverse intersections between the originally oral poet and the Homer that appears in the Western literary canon. The

representations of Omeros, though he appears in different forms, are conflated into one character. Omeros re-appears throughout the text in guises such as a Native American shaman, a West African griot, the St. Lucian fisherman known as Seven Seas, and as Derek Walcott self-reflexively negotiating his assumed literary position as 'Homer of the Antilles' (Okpewho 32).

The metamorphosis from Homer to Omeros initiates Walcott's interpretation of the Greek bard as a culturally transferable poet. The shifting character of Omeros loosely signifies an oral storyteller vocalizing a community's collective memory and affirming their cultural identity through the telling of their tale within geographically specific parameters. In order to reintroduce contexts of oral exchange into a written form, Walcott provides ambience between oral storytellers, their communities and their surroundings while also connecting these people to one another by adapting Homer across borders of time and space. In seeking a middle ground between writing and orality, Walcott begins to reverse the distancing and de-contextualizing effects of writing. Though not literally possible since, as discussed above, writing allows physical distance between reader and place, this tension produces writing that grasps for a "real setting." The Omeros characters maintain a sense of local specificity because each exists liminally between a particular nature and culture. Walcott works to show the connections that exist between indigenous cultures and their particular places and the extraordinary trauma they endure when their populations suffer dispossession of their lands and displacement of their

peoples. *Omeros* is simultaneously bound to a specific place and a universally adaptable figure that represents the oral storytellers of many cultures.

Walcott's poetic alternation of identities lays equal claim to the emblematic figure of Homer for all oppressed people. In the Western tradition, the tale of Troy, as the prototypical text of the European literary canon, has been used to sanctify claims of intellectual and cultural superiority. *Omeros* undoes some of that propaganda. The depth of Walcott's epic-like poem honors dispossessed peoples. At the close of Chapter II, Book III, Homer becomes *Omeros* and his accompanying descriptions show him as a vessel breathing out language as an oral poet breathes a story to life. The narrator hears "a hollow moan exhaled from a vase, / not for kings floundering in lances of rain; the prose/ of abrupt fishermen cursing over canoes" (15). The focus on fishermen brings the story down from exalted epic battles to the accessible ordinariness of daily life in a difficult postcolonial economic situation. Walcott replaces the aristocratic version of Homer with *Omeros* of the marginalized. He adopts the archetypal figure of western high culture for use by societies that have been shattered by western culture. Robert Hamner, a prolific Walcott scholar, aptly describes *Omeros* as an "epic of the dispossessed" (14). He argues that *Omeros* shifts the heroic ideal into more egalitarian terms: "*Omeros* encompasses precisely those individuals who are traditionally peripheral in standard classics" (27). The central figures of *Omeros* come from the ranks of people largely ignored by the epic tradition of scribal Europe. Projecting the form of Homer

into multiple non-European societies does important work in transferring some of the perceived power of a 'traditional' or 'classical' Homer for universal adaptation. As Omeros, Homer's cultural transferability allows him to represent the oppression and fragmentation experienced by people world-wide.

Homer first appears in the text as a small bust in the studio apartment of Antigone, Walcott's Greek lover in the text. She speaks the name *Omeros*: "That's what we call him in Greek" (14). Her geographic connection to Homer allows her to disclose his true name from the place where he actually lived. Omeros is Homer reconnected to the sensibility of his island home. Walcott, as a character, translates the Greek poet's name into St. Lucian elements: "O was the conch-shell's invocation, *mer* was / both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, / *os*, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes / and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore" (14). Omeros's name indicates his deeply elemental existence that locates him within a sea-related life. The animistic influences of the conch-shell, sea, bone and surf in his name evidence Omeros's engagement with presences in the natural world. The word pieces that interlock to form *Omeros* link nature with sound and language: the conch moans, the white surf crashes and hisses consonants, the dry leaves crunch and the cave-mouth echoes with the tide. Walcott's emphasis on the sounds created by nature suggests the very root of language in sound¹². His next line, "The name stayed in my mouth" (14), locates Omeros within a spoken, sounded, existential realm. The sound-based economy of Omeros's name reflects a sense of orality that operates in a world of

sound. As Ong argues in Orality and Literacy, sound and the dynamics of hearing shape oral worldviews¹³. Transmitted through writing, his name exemplifies the hybridity of scribal and oral material in this text. Aspects of both traditions merge in his being: Omeros reaches readers in a written form while his name, voice, and history locate him in an oral world.

Hearing Omeros's name in Antigone's studio immediately initiates Walcott's corollary reference to the St. Lucian fisherman called Seven Seas. Seven Seas' relationship to the sea--the 'Sea' in his name like the 'mer' of Omeros being one vivid example--underscores the primacy of oceanic consciousness in Omeros. In Antigone's studio, Walcott finds himself thinking "of Seven Seas sitting near the reek / of drying fishnets, listening to the shallows' noise" (14). The blind Seven Seas, also called Old St. Omere (17), is the first and last form that Omeros assumes. His blindness intensifies his sensory exchanges and interactions with the external world. As Seven Seas makes coffee at dawn, he *sees by feeling* the growing light on his skin and *listening* to his surroundings: "Then he heard the first breeze / washing the sea-almond's wares; last night there had been / a full moon white as his plate. He saw with his ears" (11). Seven Seas synaesthetically interprets communication from the non-human world. David Abram describes synaesthesia as a blending of two or more senses that allows an animistic reciprocity of perception: "one's auditory attention may be joined with the visual focus in order to enter into a living relation with the expressive character of things" (130). Abram argues that the animating power of

synaesthesia experienced in oral cultures transfers to a relationship with writing in literate cultures. He explains how our two eyes and inner hearing converge upon texts--listening silently to oneself while reading--rather than intertwining our senses with contexts. This shift in synaesthetic focus silences animistic reciprocity with our surroundings. "It is only when a culture shifts its participation to these printed letters that the stones fall silent. Only as our senses transfer their animating magic to the written word do the trees become mute, the other animals dumb" (131). Seven Seas' blindness pulls him outside of visual literacy into an acutely perceptive and synaesthetic relationship with his world. His auditory and tactile senses intertwine to experience the living world around him.

Seven Seas, Homer and St. Lucia all share the experience of blindness. The island, St. Lucia, was named for the patron saint of the blind. Allegedly, Columbus--though more likely one of his navigators--encountered the island on the 13th of December in 1494. As that happens to be the day celebrated by Roman Catholics as St. Lucia's Day, the island was re-named St. Lucia. This Christian patron saint lived in 4th century Sicily. Though many differing legends account for how and why she tore out her own eyes, the stories converge on the point of self-infliction and in paintings she always holds a pair of eyes in her hands.

The blindness shared by the mythic Homer, Seven Seas and the patron saint of St. Lucia increases the capacity of their inward vision. Blindness allows Seven Seas to distill life's deeper meanings, "because a closing darkness

brightens love" (282). Seven Seas' interiority admits him into a world of acute perception and prophecies. When Achille is missing during his dream-journey to Africa, Seven Seas intuitively knows where he is. "'Africa,' the blind one said. 'He go come back soon.' / Philoctete nodded. What else was left to believe / but miracles? Whose vision except a blind man's / or a blind saint's, her name as bright as the island's?" (154) The 'vision' of a blind man and a blind saint imply that unusual powers of perception might be granted to those deprived of sight but possessing heightened abilities to engage their other senses.

In Omeros, the blindness of the island's patron saint metaphorically relates to Walcott's poetic inward vision of St. Lucia. He uses the blindness of Lucia (and Homer) to allow him to move beyond the visible into a sort of poetic transcendence gained from interiority. "I was seeing / the light of St. Lucia at last through her own eyes, / her blindness, her inward vision as revealing / as his" (282). The blindness of Homer, St. Lucia and Seven Seas accentuates their internal consciousness. Interestingly, the correlation between sound and interiority is a major aspect of orality. According to Ong's research,

The principal characteristic of oral psychodynamics is the unique relationship of sound to interiority when sound is compared to the rest of the senses. This relationship is important because of the interiority of human consciousness and of human communication itself. [...] And above all, the human voice comes from inside the human organism which provides the voice's resonances. (71)

Walcott's emphasis on blind characters indicates his poetic interest in interiority, consciousness and communication that originates within a listener.

Ong explains that while sight isolates the viewer at a distance from what she observes, sound incorporates and pours into the hearer. A sound-dominated culture tends to embrace harmonizing and unifying aspects, as sound is unified *within* the hearer, rather than the dissecting and analytical tendencies inherent in sight-dominated societies. Walcott, too, seems to be concerned with imperatives of unifying--bringing many things together within one--on a poetic and cultural scale. Above, he metaphorically conflates the blind patron saint with his native island. To extend this relationship, as sound is unified within a blind woman, sounds originating from many distinct languages and cultures are brought together in a sort of harmony – though not homogenized – within the island of St. Lucia. Walcott figuratively represents this unifying principle with the confluence of various birds embroidered on Maud's green quilt. She brings together birds that represent European, Asian, African and Caribbean speakers-- "all the horned island's birds (267)" --into one cohesive quilt. Her quilt suggests Walcott's own narrative act of bringing diverse elements together within a single text that, in turn, represents the myriad cultural and linguistic pieces brought together in St. Lucia.

The sound-dominated quality of orality also relates to Walcott's poetic implementation of sound in his writing. Walcott use of sound suggests a visible representation of an invisible spoken language. In Walcott's 1993 Odyssey: A Stage Version, the blind narrator, Billy Blue, closes the play with the lines, "Since that first blind singer, others will sing down the ages [...] For a rock, a rock, a

rock, a rock-steady woman / Let the waves clap their hands and the surf whisper amen" (160). The invocation of the mythically blind Homer by a blind singer doubly reinforces blind interiority in these final lines. The inward experience of imagining the spoken sounds of rock, rock rocking and the surf's whisper of amen are two examples of his sound-influenced aesthetic in motion. This type of soundful poetic resonance permeates Omeros and suggests the spoken sounds of oral language.

As an oral griot, or West African storyteller, Omeros reveals how sound shapes identity in oral cultures. In an oral community, their storyteller protects memory by re-speaking it; he recites the past to inform the present and future cultural identity of his tribe. Sounding their stories holds the collective history of his people together. Tragically, the mass displacement of Africans into slavery traumatized identity in many disjunctive ways. The slave industry violently broke people from their pasts and sundered ties to local oral griots and their tales of the tribe. Dislocation from these spoken tribal histories fractured identity for many Africans displaced in the Caribbean. Yet, Africans reconstituted identity in new ways in the Caribbean using pieces of traditional African life. Aspects of West African griots live on today in the Caribbean in calypsonian performances. "When the slaves were forced to the Caribbean they brought with them aspects of their culture," Curwen Best tells us, "chief among them their songs, their music--and undoubtedly components of the griot tradition" (17). The commonalities between griots and calypsonians include the oral nature of their

form, extemporaneous recital to audience, imaginative aspects of spontaneous composition and surprise twists. In forms such as obeah and calypso, the traditional African roles of shaman and griot resurface in Caribbean identity. Walcott's inclusion of these roles in Omeros underscores the imaginative and persistent ways in which identity is maintained and reconstructed from diverse elements within a New World location.

Achille encounters Omeros in the form of an oral griot during his redemptive African dream-journey. The griot of Achille's ancestral village mediates between nature and culture as "a white-eyed storyteller" (139). This shamanic Omeros functions socially as the keeper of his people's collective cultural memory: "every night the seed-eyed, tree wrinkled bard, / the crooked tree who carried the genealogical leaves / of the tribe in his cave-throated moaning, / traced the interlacing branches of their river-rooted lives as intricately as the mangrove roots. Until morning / he sang, till the river was the only one to hear it" (140). He poetically becomes a natural object, a seed-eyed and wrinkled tree, conversing with the river after the people leave. His "cave-throated moaning" suggests the sound-dominated interiority Ong attributes to oral cultures: focusing on human sounds and consciousness originating from *within* the body. The resonance of the griot's spoken words comes from the internal cave of his throat.

In the center of the text, Walcott (as a character) takes a guided tour near the Trail of Tears in the United States. He consciously listens to the creek

running past him: "I made myself hear the water's / language around the rocks in its clear-running lines / and its small shelving falls with their eddies, 'Choctaws,' 'Creeks,' 'Choctaws,'" (177). He attunes his perception to an animate conversation. Multiple meanings of the word *creek*—both tribe and tributary--accentuate the sense that Walcott is attempting to work in a code shared by humans and the animate world. Listening to the creek utter "Creek" exemplifies Walcott's poetic search for the deep root of language in landscape and demonstrates his vision of allowing nouns to speak themselves. In the same sentence, he turns to the 'classical' reconstruction of Greek philosophy and literature into a canonized form of cultural superiority. The appropriated Greek tradition appears to be synonymous with oppression: "...and I thought of the Greek revival / carried past the names of towns with columned porches, / and how Greek it was, the necessary evil / of slavery, in the catalogue of Georgia's / marble past, the Jeffersonian ideal in / plantations with its Hectors and Achilleuses" (177). He associates the economic exploitation of slavery with the legitimizing intellectualism of a Greek tradition adopted secondhand by European and American societies. Then, he recognizes Omeros as a Native American shaman with a rattle in his hands. In these few lines, Walcott examines the co-option of Greek tradition and then re-appropriates the original Greek tradition--the epic oral bard--to represent the Native Americans. Western culture adopted the Greek tradition and used it to presume cultural superiority and legitimize the destruction of cultures and bodies of those outside its cultural

confines. Omeros's appearance as a Native American shaman asserts that Greek tradition can be reclaimed from a discourse of domination to be a locus of resistance.

Omeros acts as a shaman in the context of a situation that mobilized and inspired Native American resistance before turning into a violent altercation with the U.S. military. The Native American Ghost Dance promised returned lands, resurgence of the depleted buffalo herds, reunions with the deceased and disappearance of the whites from the earth (Lesser 110). When the Ghost Dance spread to the Lakota people, the Bureau of Indian Affairs reacted by arresting Sitting Bull. According to Michael Elliot, their reasoning stemmed from fear of violent resistance from the Lakota in response to land seizures¹⁴. On December 15, 1890, Sitting Bull was killed during his arrest. The Army then rounded up Lakota presumed to be antagonistic. On December 28, the Seventh Cavalry ordered a band of Miniconjou Lakota to camp near Wounded Knee Creek. In the morning, the Cavalry started to seize the Lakota weapons. One refused, and his gun fired inadvertently in the struggle. The U.S. soldiers killed nearly 300 Lakotas, "including dozens of women and children trapped in a nearby ravine" (Elliot 207). Their bodies were left to freeze in the snow. Before his death and the massacre at Wounded Knee, Sitting Bull was a highly respected leader among the Lakota, and Catherine Weldon was his private secretary during this time. Walcott curiously chooses a white woman as a mouthpiece and speaks through the persona of Catherine Weldon. Prior to Omeros, Walcott wrote a

play entitled, "The Ghost Dance," in which Weldon plays the central character. Her roles in both texts cast her heroically in spite of the tragic outcome of the Ghost Dance.

Weldon observes the situation and describes the heartbreak of broken treaties and the tragic winter of the Ghost Dance. She initially hopes the government will act with integrity and blot out the injustices endured by the Native people. She abandons that hope as she witnesses the truth of the American government's intentions. The whiteness of ghosts in the Ghost Dance, the whiteness of multiplying white people, the whiteness of snow, the whiteness of smoke and the whiteness of pages symbolically and repeatedly connect the destruction of Native Americans and their erasure from American history. The white paper of the treaties made between the U.S. government and Native Americans inspired hope and then the promises of the "treaties changing like clouds, their ink faded" (180). The government's erasure of treaty commitments is like the overwhelming oblivion of snow that conceals everything underneath. Omeros tears another worthless treaty into snow: "The snow blew in their wincing faces like papers / from another treaty which a blind shaman tears / to bits in the wind" (214). The image of a worthless torn-up treaty interchanged with snow accumulates a sense of overpowering whiteness.

In Walcott's play, "The Ghost Dance," Kicking Bear describes how the tribes will disappear like leaves burned into smoke or covered by snow or flour. He predicts the colors of the people erased by white people: "when all the red

tribes are blown across the earth / and their leaves will be buried in your whiteness, a whiteness with no memory, like the deep snow. They will fade like weevils in a bag of flour / denied us by the agency. They want us to fade" (130). The double injury of the flour both withheld and used against them signals the greater scale of inhumanity involved in destroying the buffalo population which left tribes in a position of either starving or begging for government assistance. Alexander Lesser identifies the disappearance of a sustainable food source in the form of buffalo as the most destructive outcome of white settlement. "With the disappearance of the buffalo, the economic stability and security of the Indian tribes vanished. The Ghost Dance doctrine brought hope" (109). As Seven Seas and Achille burn raked leaves in Omeros, Seven Seas makes the same connection between burning leaves, snow and erasure that Kicking Bear voiced above. The leaves burn while Seven Seas tells Achille about his days as a Ghost Dancer like the smoke rising from the fire. As they watch the smoke, "He described the snow / to Achille" (164). This scene combines the images of snow and smoke as figurative forms of erasure. Both the colored leaves and colored dancers are deprived of substance in the form of smoke and ghosts. Their tangibility ceases. Covering leaves with snow or burning them into smoke produces the same result: they become invisible.

After the massacre at Wounded Knee, Catherine runs through the Indian camp and finds Omeros first in shock and then later continuing to tell the tale of his tribe. He mournfully declares that "the Ghost Dance has tied the tribes into

one nation. / As the salmon grows tired of its ladder of stone, / as have we of fighting the claws of the White Bear, / dripping red beads on the snow.

Whiteness is everywhere" (217). The violence of this image, a White Bear with someone else's blood on his claws, underscores the violence of the historical situation. In the experience of Omeros as the Native American shaman, whiteness obliterates tribal memory and erases Native Americans from mainstream history. The repetition of white metaphors feels almost hopeless and unstoppable.

In response to Kicking Bear's observation, "They want us to fade (130)," the narrative act of Omeros brings "faded" people into relief. In "The Muse of History," Walcott explains that the innocence involved in this re-creation differs from nostalgia for innocent Noble Savages,

The great poetry of the New World does not pretend to such an innocence, its vision is not naïve. Rather, like its fruits, its savour is a mixture of the acid and the sweet, the apples of its second Eden have the tartness of experience. In such poetry there is a bitter memory and it is the bitterness that dries last on the tongue. It is the acidulous that supplies its energy. (40-41)

Omeros exemplifies this bittersweet combination of the present's fresh possibilities and the past's tragic blows. In the amalgam of meanings for whiteness, blank pages symbolize both broken treaties and an opening of hope into the future that supplants the endless white metaphors of erasure. Optimistically, white means innocence and possibilities for recreating the future. "The clouds turned blank pages [...]/ The New World was wide enough for a

new Eden / of various Adams. A smell of innocence / like that of the first heavy snow came off the page" (181). Walcott certainly acknowledges the tragic injustices of the past, but he also grasps this fresh possibility to make Native Americans visible within mainstream historical and cultural consciousness by recovering stories and listening now.

Walcott presents a possibility for re-naming and re-creating in the spirit of "various Adams" in the New World. He outlines the potency of language grounded in nature in his essay, "The Muse of History." His vision of an elemental poet is one who creates a fresh language generated from reciprocity with environment. "It is this awe of the numinous," says Walcott, "this elemental privilege of naming the New World which annihilates history in our great poets, an elation common to all of them, whether they are aligned by heritage to Crusoe and Prospero or to Friday and Caliban. They reject ethnic ancestry for faith in elemental man" (40). Walcott seems to be describing his own poetic ambition to reassemble the diasporic shattering of cultures, histories and vocabularies into a new language shaped by participation with the surrounding elements. His own creation, *Omeros*, blends autobiography with the author's re-interpretation of Homer of the Greek Isles. The oral bard provides a good template for the elemental language that Walcott seeks. The oral Homeric tradition evidences participation with the communication embedded in the natural world: "In the Homeric songs the natural landscape itself bears the omens and signs that instruct human beings in their endeavors; the gods speak

directly through the pattern of clouds, waves, and the flight of birds" (Abram 102). Although they exist in different times and places, Walcott and Homer share a common sensibility shaped by island experience and their participation with an animate field of presences. He recovers Homer as an oral poet grounded in the Greek elements in a way that echoes his own aspirations to navigate a written verse form based in oral and animistic language intrinsic to St. Lucia.

As a character within the text, Walcott tells Homer/Omeros that he's never read his book all the way through. He claims he hasn't read all of Homer's work but he *hears* Homer in his natural surroundings, "I have always heard / your voice in that sea, master, it was the same song / of the desert shaman [...] it rose in the cedars, / in the laurier-cannelles, pages of rustling trees. Master, I was the freshest of all your readers" (283). Walcott encounters Homer in the *sound* of the surf, trees and landscape of St. Lucia. This nonchalant confession of a partial reading diminishes Walcott's dependence on the static literary version of Homeric poetry. The sense of sound dominates their connection. The two poets connect through the sea's primal wholeness; Walcott asserts that "our only inheritance that elemental *noise* / of the windward, unbroken breakers, Ithaca's / or Africa's, all joining the ocean's voice" (130; my emphasis). Homer and Walcott share a common sensibility entrenched in island existence and the sounds intrinsic to that experience. An oceanic sense translates between these two cultures--Greek and St. Lucian--rooted in the same elements. Walcott even writes as a sort of Homer of the Antilles, "So deeply did Walcott internalize his

model that he saw himself as the Homer of the Antilles, appointed--by genius or by fate, it's not quite clear--to record the region's virtues, its woes, and its destiny" (Okpewho 32). Though he may avoid the grandiose implications of that sort of title, Walcott does embody a kind of Homer of the Antilles through his prolific representations of the archipelago and his self-reflexive process of classical associations that evokes Homer within the text.

Walcott valorizes the idea of artistically imitating or mimicking Homer. His views on mimicry, described at length in "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" and "The Muse of History," show how it can be "an act of the imagination" ("Mimicry" 55). In "The Muse of History," Walcott explains that "the great poets have no wish to be different, no time to be original, that their originality emerges only when they have absorbed all the poetry which they have read, entire, that their first work appears to be the accumulation of other people's trash, but that they become bonfires" (62). The original Homer also used the material he had inherited from others before him. Ong tells us that Homer mostly weaved pre-existing pieces together:

Careful study of the sort Milman Parry was doing showed that he repeated formula after formula. The meaning of the Greek term 'rhapsodize', *rhapsōidein*, 'to stitch song together' (*rhaptein*, to stitch; *ōide*, song), became ominous: Homer stitched together prefabricated parts. Instead of a creator, you had an assembly line worker. This idea was particularly threatening to far-gone literates. (23)

Given that the strict originality of even Homer's work is doubtful, Walcott's notion of mimicry appears especially fitting. Ong explains that oral cultures

acquire knowledge by “achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known” while writing sets the conditions for personal distance or objectivity. He suggests that “the ‘objectivity’ which Homer and other oral performers do have is that enforced by this formulaic expression: the individual’s reaction is not expressed as simply individual or ‘subjective’ but rather as encased in the communal reaction, the communal ‘soul’” (46). Homer’s imitation of preceding rhapsodists ensured that the epic he transmitted reflected his community’s shared spirit and cultural inheritance. Many of the adjectives attributed to orality that Ong uses—close, communal, empathetic—describe Walcott’s attempts to maintain a sense of orality in his written expression of St. Lucia’s diverse community. For Walcott, “The act of imagination was the creative effort of the tribe. Later such legends may be written by individual poets, but their beginnings are oral, familial, the poetry of firelight” (“Muse” 48). Walcott’s sense of mimicry—using materials from various oral traditions, Homeric references, African elements and the Western literary canon —reflects the multiplicity of sources implied in the communal soul of St. Lucia that Walcott seeks to represent. A rhapsodist himself, Walcott stitches together borrowed pieces derived from St. Lucia’s fragmented culture and the island’s natural elements to represent his island to the world.

Near the end of the text, *Seven Seas/Omeros* leads Walcott’s character through a Dante-style underworld. He tells Walcott that the journey of his craft needs to circle back to where he started and encompass his home. *Omeros*

implores: "Therefore, this is what this island has meant to you, / why my bust spoke, why the sea-swift was sent to you: / to circle yourself and your island with this art" (291). The odyssey of Omeros ends where Walcott's poetic journey of St. Lucia begins: ostensibly the creation of Omeros fulfills this poetic circling for Walcott. As they row towards the volcano, Walcott cries with love for the island. Omeros sees his tears and tells Walcott that they will praise St. Lucia together. Walcott hears his "own thin voice riding on his praise / the way a swift follows a crest, leaving its shore" (286). In this circular, intra-textual moment, the swift of his voice takes off and presumably results in the praise of his island found in Omeros. With Homer/Omeros as a powerful guide, Walcott lifts off in his own direction using the momentum of the tradition he inherits. Though Walcott ultimately repudiates his own reliance on Homer, "My light was clear. It defined the fallen schism / of a starfish, its asterisk printed on sand, / its homage to Omeros my exorcism" (294), he first imaginatively absorbs Homer's tradition and incorporates the best bits into his larger cosmic vision of New World elemental grandeur and possibility. Paul Breslin describes the irony of using and then releasing Homer "in order to arrive at a Caribbean consciousness that does not live in the shadow of European myth, Walcott uses mythical scaffolding to raise the dignity and power of his St. Lucian characters, but then dismantles it to allow them to stand on their own" (2).

Though Walcott's choice to use Homeric references for his St. Lucian characters does reveal a heavy investment in Western models, he uses Homeric references mostly to reinvent the Homeric archetype for universal and non-exclusive adaptation. While Walcott's relation to Homer certainly remains conflicted, one of his triumphs in Omeros is utilizing mimicry in a way that conjures the immense weight and force of the archetypal Homer in new contexts. The myriad appearances of Omeros show the regenerative possibilities of elemental poets within communities that traditionally were unrepresented, ignored, marginalized and oppressed. The various forms of Omeros show the direct interaction of oral language with place and they often act as shamanic social intermediaries negotiating for balance between nature and culture. Walcott retrieves Homer from a crystallized literary version and reconnects him to a flux of language and sea as Omeros. As a shaman, a griot, and a blind fisherman, Omeros recovers the orality of the original Greek bard and translates the figure across cultures as an oral storyteller vocalizing a community's shared identity in relation to a specific place. Walcott emphasizes the ties that bind indigenous cultures to their particular surroundings and the trauma that results from dispossession and displacement. Omeros represents both a universal figure and a locally-specific storyteller in each of his forms, including Walcott's own Omeric role as Homer of the Antilles. He dissolves the borders between orality/writing and localism/universalism by using a Caribbean style of oral-writing that becomes more universally empathetic in proportion to its specificity.

“Where the iguana is found”: Walcott’s ‘New World’ Language

For Walcott, the prime meridian both cartographically and culturally divides the Old World and the New World. He claims the term ‘New World’ to affirm a sensibility of newness with a fresh capacity for wonder, elation and awe inspired by the particular geography west of the imaginary Greenwich line. Walcott’s sense of creating a ‘new’ language arises from his conception of a ‘New World’ where an individual can experience “the enormous, gently opening morning of his possibility, his body touched with dew, his nerves as subtilized to sensation as the mimosa [...] the possibility of a man and his language waking to wonder here” (“Muse” 53). Walcott rejects the teleology of Old to New as absurd and instead praises writers who “repeat to the New World its simultaneity with the Old” and whose “vision of man is elemental, a being inhabited by presences, not a creature chained to his past” (“Muse” 37). These writers, Walcott among them, privilege sensorial engagement with their surroundings and the language that emerges from that exchange.

Walcott appropriates the notion of Adam naming his surroundings to offer an optimistic opportunity for ‘Adamic’ re-naming shaped by participation and reciprocity with the New World environment. Instead of a mindset that the Biblical eviction from Eden resulted in ‘man v. nature’, Walcott uses the imagery of Adam to symbolize reconciliation of man *with* nature. He proposes a re-creation of language rooted in the locally specific natural elements. Walcott explains that “a political philosophy rooted in elation would have to accept belief

in a second Adam, the re-creation of the entire order" (40). The idea of Adam naming the world around him¹⁵ works poetically for Caribbean agency trying to "recreate the entire order" with a renewed relationship to the 'Old World.'

In Omeros, Walcott reflects the diverse cultural and linguistic composition of St. Lucian culture by using his aesthetic of New World language rooted in elemental awe. This 'new' language is Walcott's lifetime poetic process adeptly expressed in the pages of Omeros. It speaks to the experience of the New World generally from the specific milieu of the Antilles. Walcott's 'new' language incorporates the oral nature of Caribbean Creoles with the grapholect of English. Its metrical sense follows the rhythms of life on an island and the line imitates the respiration of surf upon shore. The words arise from listening to an animate world to find ways for language to express "the clear concentric / rings from a pebble, from the right noun on the page" (266).

Throughout Omeros, Maud Plunkett embroiders her green quilt with a tapestry of birds that have migrated to St. Lucia. The birds on her quilt represent speakers from all over the world who now use both English and Creole on the island. The various birds Maud stitches, "pinned to a habitat many had adopted" (313), are emblematic of the fragmented cultural and linguistic pieces gathered together on the island and seamed within the textual quilt of Omeros. Her needlework corresponds with the lingual people of St. Lucia that use both the "white language" of English and the "marine dialect" of Creole. The African, Indian and Chinese birds on St. Lucia speak to each other in English. "The

African swallow, the finch from India / now spoke the white language of a tea-sipping tern, / with the Chinese nightingales on a shantung screen.” The man-o-war, a bird representative of black St. Lucians, speaks sea-inspired Creole. On Maud’s quilt, the man-o’-war is “talking the marine dialect of the Caribbean / with nightjars, finches, and swallows” (313). The tea-sipping tern’s white language usurps that of the African swallow, the Indian finch and Maud’s native Irish, as well. Yet, it also provides a middle mode of communication for these birds from various locations. The simultaneous existence of a marine Creole and Standard English on St. Lucia presents a polyglossic opportunity for Walcott to incorporate both in the language he forwards in Omeros. In Bakhtinian terms, polyglossia is the simultaneous presence of two or more languages interacting within a single cultural system (Dialogic Imagination 431). Maud’s quilt represents Walcott’s textual art of gathering pieces and stitching them together in new ways.

The textual quilt of Omeros represents St. Lucia’s past and present through its immensely diverse linguistic composition. The polyglossic stitching includes French Patois, English Creole, Standard English, African, animistic articulation and Aruac. They come together in a green place, St Lucia, like the medley of birds brought together in Maud’s green quilt. Walcott stitches in fragments from the Amerindian Aruac language left by the first inhabitants of St. Lucia. He honors the traces of Aruac culture on the island and incorporates their language in the polyglossia of the text. As the first ‘Adams’ on the island, the

Aruac named their place according to what they found there. They named the island after a green lizard: "its lost name, when the hunched island was called / 'Iounalao,' 'Where the iguana is found'" (4). Walcott suggests that the second 'Adams' of the Caribbean employ a parallel strategy of nomenclature. The New World sensibility of his language seeks a right relation between place and language. He asks, "Where have cultures originated? By the force of their natural surroundings. You build according to the topography of where you live" ("Culture or Mimicry" 56). The presence of the iguana, which appears on multiple occasions in the text, symbolizes a kind of organic correspondence between language and surroundings. The iguana climbs up the vines, "its elbows akimbo, its deliberate tail / moving with the island. The slit pods of its eyes / ripened in a pause that lasted for centuries, / that rose with the Aruacs' smoke till a new race / unknown to the lizard stood measuring the trees" (4-5). Its tail's motion in sync with the island, the iguana continues on its way despite the changes in human population and language over the centuries. The iguana's continued existence on St. Lucia connects the present with a language of the past that reaches us only in shards. St. Lucia is still where the iguana is found. This inclusion of Aruac language is one of several multi-vocal narrative tactics that Walcott employs in *Omeros* to represent St. Lucia's diverse linguistic world of both human and non-human agency.

Currently, the two most common languages used in St. Lucia are French patois and English. This results largely from the island's unusual colonial

history. The island changed hands fourteen times between the French and the English while they imported slave labor from Africa and then indentured servants from Asia. This recurring contest between France and England disseminated languages rather unevenly in St. Lucia. Generally, French Patois is spoken in rural areas that are populated predominantly by black Catholic citizens. English remains the language of the city, of the government, of the Protestant population and of the educational system. English is privileged as the dominant intellectual medium and mode of transnational communication. Growing up in the capital city of Castries, Walcott spoke English in his middle-class--though very poor--Protestant home and learning standard French as a foreign language at school. Though surrounded by Creole speakers on the island, Walcott likely didn't speak much Creole as he grew up. Laurence Breiner explains that the class to which Walcott's family belonged restricted the use of Creole, "but after World War II, in Walcott's late adolescence, an increasing sense of national identity precedes the movement toward independence, and in that atmosphere he had even more reason to think of creole as 'his' language, the language--one of the languages--of his people and country" (34). Like so many people in the New World, Walcott lands in-between realms. His mixed racial ancestry, divided linguistic heritage, and conflicting allegiances to Europe and Africa force him to negotiate a stance. Adopting aspects of Creole to shape his predominantly Anglophone poetics suggests a tenuous linguistic compromise that tries to both honor the national identity of St. Lucia and reach a global

reading audience. For example, Walcott often includes French patois in dialogue, such as "'*Ces mamailles-là!*' Statics shouted, meaning '*Children!*'" (106). He also employs patois to transmit local specificity like the sea-swift's St. Lucian name, "*l'hirondelle des Antilles*" (126), or the fisherman "commonly known as "*Toujours Sou*" or "Always Soused"' (127). Although in the balance of languages, French patois and English Creole both have substantial weight, certainly, Omeros most heavily favors English.

Since Walcott works in an English 'grapholect' that assimilates aspects of Creole rather than transcribing it, the poetic choices he makes are enabled by a written tradition with dictionaries and previous literature that allow for nuances and subtleties of language to expand from recorded usage. Walter Ong explains that a grapholect is "a transdialectal language formed by a deep commitment to writing. Writing gives a grapholect a power far exceeding that of any purely oral dialect" (8). Put simply, a grapholect is the written form of any language. The English grapholect is the "unabridged dictionary of all dictionaries in the English language" (Cornford). It differs from its corresponding spoken language in the style or 'manners' of use and does not depend on gesture, expression or tonal inflection to transmit meaning. The recorded vocabularies of grapholects often exceed millions of words with chronicled previous usages while oral cultures usually work with a few thousand words and little known semantic history¹⁶. The immense vocabulary open to writers overwhelms that of oral speakers. Ong goes on to note that while oral cultures don't need writing, grapholects can't

exist without oral precedents. "In all the wonderful worlds that writing opens," Ong tells us, "the spoken word still resides and lives. Written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings" (8). The resources available to Walcott within a grapholect allow him to manipulate words with the poetic resonance of orality. Emphasizing "the world of sound, the natural habitat of language," moves his writing from literary abstraction toward oral concretization. Breiner notes that Walcott uses the English grapholect as "the form of language that can succeed on the page" (31). First and foremost, Walcott works in the world of the English grapholect and consciously chooses oral components of Creole to shape his writing.

Composing a poem that aims to represent the people of St. Lucia largely in the language and mode of their former imperial power presents a variety of challenges. Given that independence from England came only in 1972, Walcott was forty-two years old when St. Lucia officially achieved sovereignty. Walcott seems to grasp the problematic nature of using the English language and forms. Though he grapples with the issues intellectually, his artistic voice comes out primarily in English. He explains, "Some people ask why I sound so English in my poetry. The simple answer is that you write in the meter of your thought" (Walcott, Albany). Using the language associated with foreign rule triggered some criticism and hostility toward Walcott within the Caribbean intelligentsia, but his expert use of English also wins him some fans. In an interview with Rani

Dube, Salman Rushdie relates his theory that the English language is the greatest gift the British ever exported: "the English language is unique in its flexibility, in its subtleness. This language was created by this cold grey northern island, and is yet somehow large enough and versatile enough to express the cultures and the thoughts and the dynamics of societies which have never come remotely close to that world (72)." The adaptability of English allows people across the globe to use it as a tool to express their own particular experiences which are often entirely unrelated to the language's place of origin. Rushdie goes on to say that the best things coming out in English are "happening through people who have nothing that could remotely be called an Anglo-Saxon attitude. It's like a reverse takeover of the Empire. It's as though the people who were colonized are now doing the colonizing. What English writers are there now that you can compare to Derek Walcott?" (Rushdie 12-13). Walcott's work is among the best progeny of English literature because it opens up the language for innovative usage, detaches the language from colonial stigma and moves it into a creative future of egalitarian adoption.

In their colonies, the British Empire controlled the intellectual currency of language, education and the literary canon. The legacy of this totalizing academic influence contributes to a doubling of consciousness¹⁸ for many people. For example, Walcott grew up learning English history, speaking the English language, reading English literature and internalizing 'Englishness' to some degree. Growing up on "the provincial edge of an atlas, the hem / of a frayed

empire" (170), Walcott's perception of being on the outskirts, the periphery, or the unraveled hem of the English empire complicates his identity as a Caribbean person in a colonial or postcolonial relationship with England and creates a measure of ambivalence in his use of English. In an interview with Louis Bourne, Walcott acknowledges the discrimination he is subjected to as a perceived outsider. "I would learn that every tribe hoards its culture as fiercely as its prejudices," Walcott says, "that English literature was hallowed ground [...] that colonial literatures could grow to resemble it closely, but never be considered its legitimate heir" (32). Walcott accepts his double-ness as part of his cultural inheritance and strategically positions a variety of cultural presences in his work. Essentially, Walcott uses all the tools he's inherited and makes them his own. In "The Muse of History" he asserts that "by openly fighting tradition we perpetrate it, revolutionary literature is a filial impulse and maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor" (36). In Omeros, Walcott avoids openly fighting tradition in favor of using and resisting the European presence in deliberate ways. He subverts the totalizing force of Standard English by placing it out of context and endorses Creole by placing it in the mouth of God. He represents the diverse linguistic composition of St Lucia as legitimate discourse on the same level as English. Though Walcott uses a multiplicity of languages and dialects within Omeros, his deliberate use of English in specific situations de-centers and de-naturalizes English. Walcott uses English in Omeros to undermine the exclusive and authoritative European presence implied in the

language. As he told Edward Hirsch in a 1986 interview, "English is nobody's special property. It is the property of the imagination" (qtd. in Scanlon 105).

There is an ongoing play of translation, representation and linguistic validation in Omeros. For example, the text authorizes Creole for the word of God and sanctions Standard English for use by Achille and his father in ancient Africa. As Achille begins his sunstroke journey, God endorses his journey back to Africa. Significantly, this is the Judeo-Christian God with a capital "G" and not an African deity. "And God said to Achille, 'Look, I giving you permission / to come home. Is I send the sea-swift as a pilot, / the swift whose wings is the sign of my crucifixion. / And thou shalt have no God should in case you forgot / my commandments'" (134). Putting Creole in the mouth of God powerfully sanctions it as a legitimate language. Arguably, whatever God speaks is spoken 'right.'

In the dream-journey, the character Afolabe, who represents both Achille's father and his own African self, questions Achille about his name. Many captured slaves lost their African names somewhere in the transition to slavery. They were often baptized after a forced march to the coast, where their African names would be replaced with Christian names before they boarded slave ships (Gates). Others were given names to enhance their perceived worth as slaves to buyers, such as the strong name of Achilles from Greek mythology, which would be devoid of personal meaning for the slave. In oral cultures, such as those from which many African slaves were taken, names have significant import. Taking

away someone's name constitutes a fundamental trauma to identity for oral peoples. Ong connects the perceived power of names with an oral worldview that conflates a name with that which it names: "oral folk have no sense of a name as a tag, for they have no idea of a name as something that can be seen" (Ong 33). The conversation between Achille and Afolabe plays out the axiological predicament between orality and writing regarding names and the direct connection of words with a referent. A crisis arises because Achille does not know what his name means. The name 'Achilles' lodged within the European canon has no significance to Achille the fisherman or his African father. When his father asks him what it means, Achille replies: "The deaf sea has changed around every name that you gave / us; trees, men, we yearn for a sound that is missing" (137). The sound-influenced meanings of words were stripped from the slaves along with their native languages in the transition into slavery. Achille's answer proves unsatisfactory for Afolabe. "A name means something [...] unless the sound means nothing. Then you would be nothing" (137). The inability of Afolabe to allow for abstraction demonstrates the dramatic distinction between scribal cultures that see names as labels or tags that can be removed or replaced and the oral coupling of sound and meaning with a specific entity. Afolabe asks Achille if he pointed to something visible and said, "There / is the name of that man, that tree, and this father, / would every sound be a shadow that crossed your ear, / without the shape of a man or a tree?" (138). Afolabe says the name of a man is like his shadow; it is something intrinsic to the

man that follows him because it is part of him. It reflects his outline in the daylight. Since his name has no meaning, and Achille does not care at this point to investigate its meaning, his father tells him he is a ghost and not a man. Without meaning attached to his name, Afolabe is transparent, not even a shadow, and Achille is but the ghost of a name. Later, Achille feels “The yoke of the wrong name lifted from his shoulders” (247). Achille ultimately realizes that for him the name Afolabe does have specific meaning. The name of Afolabe becomes powerful for Achille because it reconnects him to his shadow: the African ancestry that follows him.

The conversation between Achille and Afolabe is ‘scripted’ uniquely in Omeros. Rather than the three line terza rima poem format that comprises most of the poem, their conversation occurs in prose. Additionally, their names, ACHILLE and AFOLABE are centered in all capitals above their dialog like a script for a play. Generally, scripts are meant to be spoken. This adds to the weight of oral influence in this section. Pointedly, the conversation set in ancient Africa between a presumably uneducated fisherman and his tribal father occurs in modern Standard English. Mara Scanlon, observing the linguistic politics present in this format, argues that “Walcott seems to have mobilized these languages with specific intent to show their equality as viable forms within a literary text.” Assessing Achille and his father’s use of Standard English, she concludes that Walcott’s unusual language choice destabilizes notions of proper usage and “illustrates the arbitrariness of language and denaturalizes Standard

English as an authoritative and exclusive form. Just as Walcott wants to lay claim to English as an available language for the postcolonial writer, his characters assume the language with ease when it fits the purposes of the story" (107). The politics of language domination and loss surfaces in reverse in their conversation. Standard English silenced African languages in the diaspora initiated by slavery. This makes it acutely appropriate that Achille and his father use it to discuss the linguistic loss of his meaningful tribal name.

African tribal languages, exemplified by Achille's African name, Afolabe, are figuratively sewn into Maud's quilt as an African sea-swift, "the bird whose wing's wrote the word / "Afolabe," in the letters of the sea-swift" (159). On Achille's dream visit to Africa, "where his name had followed a swift, where he had been his own father and his own son" (275), he unravels threads of his own ancient culture and language. At Maud's funeral, Achille sees "the image of a swift which Maud had sewn into the silk draping her bier, and not only the African swift but all the horned island's / birds, bitterns and herons, silently screeching there" (267). The bird that connects Achille to Africa is the central image on her avian quilt. This swift represents Achille's unraveled African threads reconstituted in a green place amongst birds from all over the world.

Walcott integrates the notion of Maud's embroidered birds with his own narrative act that represents the polyglossia of St Lucia. He writes, "I will make of you with my scratching pen, / like a needle piercing the ring's embroidery / with a swift's beak, or where, like a nib from the rim of an inkwell, a martin

flickers a wing dry" (266). Relating these living birds, swift and martin, to his writing and Maud's embroidery shows an ambition to consubstantiate human and natural elements textually. Using these birds as a literary device, Walcott works toward including animism in the polyglossia of Omeros. He tries to create an animist verse form using dialogic representation that calibrates his poetic voice with the 'voice' of St Lucia. Walcott lets "aspens lift their aprons and flutter goodbye" (209) and "the sea-almonds moan over the bay" (232). Bakhtin's theory of dialogics can be expanded to include all voices in the web of nature with a generous critical stance. Bakhtin emphasizes dialogic relationships between multiple voices interacting in a text that allots value to many perspectives as opposed to a single authoritative or monologic voice. Walcott merely pushes the dialogue open a little wider to allow the natural elements of St Lucia to participate in the conversation.

The abundance of non-human linguistic descriptions throughout Omeros, such as "the hymn of mosquitoes (113)," "Time, time," swayed the brass bells of the allamanda" (251) or "a lizard crawls there and raises its question" (312), demonstrate his poetic affinity for aligning human dialogue with non-human influences. Likely, the most compelling evidence of Walcott's inclusion of animism in the text's polyglossia is the sea-swift's role in Achille's life and the ants' aid for Ma Kilman discussed in Chapter One. The vital communication of the swift and the ants enable two of the most significant narrative developments: Achille's redemptive return to Africa and Ma Kilman's obeah cure that begins a

collective healing for the fictional community. The two earth-bound female figures in the text, Ma Kilman and Maud, seem especially attuned to the non-human language around them. As Maud awaits her death from cancer, she looks to the natural world for communication. She wonders, "Was its message that rooster kicking up dirt / like a grave near her kitchen just behind the pen? / In a donkey's bray sawing the heat? [...] in the mango's leaves, the square shade under a cow?" (254). Ultimately, she interprets that her time has come from the movement of a sunflower. As explored in Chapter One, she dies and goes to a heaven, "If heaven is a green place" (307). Within the context of an oral culture, the vivid mutual perception of culture and nature makes animism a lived reality rather than a literary technique. From the other end of the spectrum, Walcott works through literary techniques *toward* the lived aspects of animism in his St Lucian culture.

In Omeros, Walcott's 'new' language mediates between human and nonhuman utterance and represents the spectrum of sounds and rhythms on his native island. The Caribbean author, Kamau Brathwaite, uses a similar notion of representing language that he terms 'nation language.' He defines 'nation language' as the non-standard tongues that Caribbean people actually speak in their various nations. Though Walcott's vision of a New World language is broader than Brathwaite's national scope, his notion of 'nation language' and the 'new' language Walcott forges serve similar purposes. Each term reflects the respective poet's own work in representing a written language that *conjures* a

spoken language of the Caribbean. They both hope to communicate a Creole-inspired poetics pieced together from the cultural collisions of Amerindians, Europeans, Africans and Asians in the New World. These two poets rely on an aesthetic of sound to shape meaning: "It is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise then you lose part of the meaning" (Braithwaite 179). The emphasis on sound in 'nation language' and Walcott's 'new' language reflect Creole languages that necessarily depend on audibility for communication, perception, survival, and song. Sounds from humans, birds, surf, wind, trees, and hurricanes intermingle to comprise meaningful language in oral cultures. These sounds of nature, such as "a cry that called from the rock (241)", "the wind's noise in the breadfruit trees" (224), "the song of the chanterelle" (318), and "the castanets of the waves" (54) are often audible in Omeros even if they are indecipherable. Such a sensibility expands the concept of language to include the sounds of both humans and nonhumans in a typically oral sense of animistic inclusion.

In primarily spoken languages such as Creole, sound is the privileged mode of communication rather than the sight domination of print literacy. Edouard Glissant insists that Creole's origins in sound govern its syntax and arrangement. "For Caribbean man, the word is first and foremost sound. Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse. This must be understood" (123). He goes on to explain that slaves were forbidden to speak to one another and thus

developed a medium of communication based on screams because they precluded translation. The slaves mimicked their animate surroundings for linguistic camouflage. "It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the disposed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise. Creole organizes speech as a blast of sound" (Glissant 124). Walcott elicits Creole's blast of sound when rhetorically imploring on behalf of Caribbean children. He asks: "When are our brood, like the sparrows, a public nuisance?" / When they screech at the sinuous swans on the Serpentine. / The swans are royally protected, but in whose hands / are the black crusts of our children?" (197). These sparrows *screech* for a more just system in which they, too, are protected. Even if they become a nuisance, their noise demands attention. Another example of the sound-based nature of Creole occurs when Major Plunkett returns to his native island of England and hears the murmur of spoken Creole while stopped at a traffic light. Waiting for the light to change, "he began to hear / the surf of a dialect none would understand; / it coiled in his ear-shell with its tireless moan, feet could not muffle it nor traffic round the Strand" (252). The repeated signification that the language Plunkett *hears* exists within his *ear* doubly indicates Creole as sound. In the midst of a traffic-packed street in London, he is reminded that the language of his other island home relates to the noise of surf and moans.

Though Walcott generally links Creole with sound, he often describes Creole specifically as having the sound and rhythm of surf. This analogy is one

way that Walcott infuses the experiential quality of orality into his grapholect. Glissant calls this kind of texture “lived rhythms” (154). He argues that the rhythms of life in a Creole society dominate the best Caribbean writing. Walcott tells us that Achille was ‘one of those children / whose voices are surf under a galvanized roof’ (323). As an adult, Achille washes his canoe in rhythm with the sea: “Thud-thud. Mop and pail. He could not rub it away. / Between the soft thud of surf the bass beat wider, / backing up his work with its monodic phrasing” (161). The rhythm of Achille’s life and the “marine dialect” of Creole that he speaks seem to directly follow from his close relationship with the sea. The interrelated components of sea, sound and life in Creole show the elemental interaction sought in Walcott’s ‘new’ language.

Walcott also uses the undulation of waves successively breaking on shore to translate lived rhythms into written poetics. He uses the wave-like pattern of terza rima for most of Omeros. Terza rima is a verse form comprised of three line groupings (tercets) with an interlocking rhyme scheme that typically follows the pattern aba bcb cdc. For Walcott, each line of his terza rima spreads like a wave on the shore. “In Omeros” he explains, “I used a long line to get the rhythm of the waves coming onto the beach and wanted the chant of that” (“The Poet as Painter”). His sea-inspired lines look like the “numbered peace of the surf’s benedictions” (283) on the page. They follow the pace of the ocean breaking and receding upon the sand.

From the provincial edge of an atlas, from the hem
of a frayed empire, a man stops. Not for another anthem,
trembling over the water--he has learnt three of them--

but for that faint sidereal drone interrupted by the air
gusting over black water, or so that he can hear
the surf in the pores of wet sand wince and pucker. (170)

The assonance of "eehnm" in "hem," "anthem" and "them" in the first stanza conjures the noise of a calm wave ending in sand. The line lengths look like the slightly varied crescendos of the sea coming to shore. In this example, the added emphasis on sound coming over the sea--"trembling over the water," "gusting over black water"--and from the surf accentuate his poetic relationship with the sea in its sound and rhythm.

In the opening passage of Walcott's stage version of the Odyssey, blind Billy Blue narrates: "The shuttle of the sea moves back and forth on this line, / All night, like the surf, she shuttles and doesn't fall / Asleep" (1). The movement of the sea embedded in Walcott's poetry relates the ebb and flow of tides that guide the rhythm of life in an island nation. Surrounded by water in motion, changing tides permeate the pace of island life. In a story centered around fishermen who necessarily depend on tidal motion for their livelihood and transportation, using the sea as a guiding "meter" seems especially appropriate. Walcott appears to borrow the momentum and flux of the ocean to recreate the lived rhythm of island experience.

The climax of Walcott's metapoetic journey occurs when he wakes up to birds bickering after descending into a Dante-like underworld with Seven Seas.

Walcott realizes that he shares with Achille “the same privilege / of an archipelago’s dawn, a fresh language / salty and shared” (295). The fresh potential of a new dawn metaphorically relates to the New World possibility of language rooted in elation and awe. “For every poet it is always morning in the world,” Walcott tells us, “History and elemental awe are always our early beginning” (“Antilles” 79). Achille’s Adamic elation at dawn--“This was the light he was happiest in” (9)--shares with Walcott the optimism of a day’s renewal and a sense of joy in the sea. Walcott’s portion of “a fresh language salty and shared” reflects the real experience of life in a marine context where saltiness pervades daily existence. The salt hanging heavy in the air and its residues forever left behind are definitive aspects of island life. The quality of saltiness conveys his language’s existence in the realm of the physical. The notion of salty language seems to correspond more directly with an actual referent that can be smelled, touched and tasted rather than abstractions. This ‘salty’ language aligns Omeros with a sea-related sensibility inherent in the Caribbean.

The sea-inspired language of Omeros demonstrates Walcott’s vision of a New World language based in reciprocity with its natural elements. The language embraces a sense of burgeoning possibility and seeks a right relation of words with physical context. Using this aesthetic, Walcott represents many of the languages that exist simultaneously in St Lucia. The ‘Iounalao’ of Aruac, ‘Afolabe’ from Africa, “*Toujours Sou*” or “Always Soused” from French patois, the sunflower presaging Maud’s death and the man- o’-war “talking the marine

dialect of the Caribbean" all contribute to the polyglossia of this text. Its admixture of linguistic and cultural shards form a new piece of art made beautiful by the diversity of its components. Walcott's language, first and foremost, is English. Yet, he draws out dialogue from a multiplicity of languages. He works to tear down attitude barriers about language, such as who speaks Creole and how it sounds. This text shows English as an equitable tongue for anybody and demonstrates the viability of Creole in high literature. Characteristic of his self-description as a "mulatto of style" (Dream 9), Walcott's impulse to blend linguistically disparate parts shows up in Omeros's mix of a Creole with a metropolitan language. This constant creolization shows his linguistic compromise with the community he seeks to represent to the world and a promise to create a language that expresses the lived experience of the New World.

“All that the sea-swift does it does in a circular pattern”: Conclusions

The sea-swift threads her way through each of the three preceding chapters. She is the long-running stitch binding the entire ‘textual quilt’ pieced together in *Omeros*. She stitches hemispheres together, “this dart of the meridian” (130), and sews “with a needle’s line, / the rift in the soul” (319). This avian seamstress repairs the split between the Old World and the New World-- “Her wing-beat carries these islands to Africa” (319)--and the soul’s tear from their division. Like Walcott’s own text, the sea-swift brings separate pieces together in an attempt to mend the “rift in the soul.”

The swift first appears hovering over the *laurier-cannelle* trees that the local fisherman sacrificed to make canoes. She provides continuity with the traditional African understanding that gods inhabit those trees while witnessing the cultural rupture involved in killing them. The swift’s imagery in this scene offers a syncretic blessing to the fisherman by combining aspects of African animism with Catholic iconography. Her gestured communication reveals that she is part of the animate universe recognized by African animism--“she had shot across / the blue ridges of the waves, to a god’s orders” (131)--while the priest makes “the swift’s sign” (8), connecting her body with Christian symbolism. The sea-swift is emblematic of the creolized nature of Caribbean life, Caribbean religious hybridity, and the intersections between fissure and continuity in the African presences of Caribbean identity.

The sea-swift has a specific relationship with Africa. In addition to being identified as an "African" sea-swift, her flights across the Atlantic connect the "antipodal shores" (238) of the Old World to the New World. For Achille to explore the African presence within his identity, her "rainbow" bridges his present life in the Caribbean with his ancestral African past. She drags Achille on his redemptive journey to ancient Africa: "this mite of the sky-touching sea / towing a pirogue a thousand times her own weight" (130). Though this journey doesn't alter the past, Achille's return to Africa empowers his present cultural identity. The African sea-swift leads him in a voyage of self-excitation that identifies some of the ruptures in language, culture, identity and religion occurring between the "antipodal shores" of Western Africa and St. Lucia.

The sea-swift "aimed to carry the cure that precedes every wound" (239) by bringing the seed which grows into a healing flower, that Ma Kilman discovers centuries later, from Africa to St. Lucia. When Ma Kilman uses an obeah trance to interpret the ants' language and locate this flower, she reopens her lapsed connection with an animate world. The ants' language enables her to find a cure within the natural world of St. Lucia for Philoctete's wounded leg. Her obeah cure initiates a sort of collective healing for her diverse community. In addition to Philoctete, both Achille and Walcott release their burdens of pain as healing begins from a cure located within their own island. Their healing, by extension, suggests that positive change might occur through a human alliance with nature.

The sea-swift often acts as a “mind-messenger” (131) between worlds. In one of Walcott’s most meta-textual moments, Omeros tells him that his poetic craft should return home to celebrate his native island. He explains to Walcott that this is “why the sea-swift was sent to you: / to circle yourself and your island with this art” (291). In effect, the sea-swift acts as a sign for Walcott to create Omeros. This moment near the end of Omeros is presumably where Walcott’s poetic journey of St. Lucia began. As Walcott begins this art of circling, he first mimics Omeros and then takes off in his own direction: “as I heard my own thin voice riding on his praise / the way a swift follows a crest, leaving its shore” (286). With Omeros as a mentor, Walcott uses creative mimicry to lift off. His notion of mimicry uses the materials on hand--Homeric references, oral traditions, Caribbean aesthetics, African animism, the Western literary canon--and patches them together in creative ways. With the swift of his voice, he creates something new out of the diasporic shattering of cultures, histories and vocabularies in St. Lucia.

As the sea-swift “circled epochs with her outstretched span” (131), the figure of Homer stretches across millennia in Omeros. Walcott metamorphoses the very ancient Homer into a West African griot in Achille’s ancestral African vision, a Native American shaman during the 1890 Ghost Dance, and a contemporary St. Lucian fisherman called Seven Seas. As Walcott re-envisions the Greek bard as a culturally transferable storyteller, he empowers those left out of the European cannon by opening up Homer’s presence for egalitarian use.

Homer's translatability as Omeros enables him to represent disenfranchised people world-wide. The figure of Omeros also reconnects Homer to the flux of orality in his forms of shaman, griot, and blind fisherman. Omeros presents Homer as an oral poet immersed in the Greek elements in a way that echoes Walcott's desire to create a written verse form using the language intrinsic to St. Lucia.

Walcott integrates St. Lucia's natural elements into his poetics on a variety of levels. He deftly incorporates animistic language to include non-human sounds, messages and articulations in the polyglossia of his text. Walcott also uses animistic metaphor to inscribe nature into his poetics. As Maud sews the birds into her quilt, Dennis watches "her hands in the half-dark out of the lamp-lit ring / in the deep floral divan, diving like a swift / to the drum's hoop" (89). Using these literary devices, Walcott tries to match his poetic voice with St. Lucia's 'voice.' In Omeros, Walcott expresses his particular sensibility of elation inspired by a sensory engagement with the St. Lucian biosphere.

Maud's quilt, featuring the sea-swift, represents the Antillean art of restoration that Walcott lays out in his Nobel acceptance speech. Her quilt and the narrative act of Omeros share the qualities of tenderly bringing together fragments, seaming them together to make a whole, and embellishing that material with their creative threadwork. Like a quilter combining diverse fabrics, Omeros gathers scraps and shreds of culture and language and reassembles them into a work of art. In Omeros, shreds of orality are sewn

throughout. They appear in the colorful ways that Walcott uses animism; they are threaded through the oral cultures of Africa, the Caribbean and North America; they show up in the patches of Caribbean Creoles in the text's dialogue; they are embroidered with words shaped by their context; and they are stitched into the border as the many forms of Omeros.

Notes

1 The essay by Pat Ismond, "Walcott Versus Braithwaite" Caribbean Quarterly 17 (1971): 54 - 71, did much to exacerbate the perception of a rift.

2 Walcott explains his views on opportunistic Africanism in "What the Twilight Says: An Overture" and in "The Muse of History." He claims that "The peasant cannot spare himself these city changes. He is the true African who does not need to proclaim it" ("Muse" 57).

3 Interestingly, Braithwaite reveals in an interview that a year he spent in St Lucia with the Extra-Mural Department inspired deep African connections for him. "So that is where I got the sense that I had not yet left Africa, of Africa as an extension into the Caribbean," Braithwaite says, "And from the Morne in St. Lucia, I saw the Harmattan, the Sahara dust, coming across the water. That I think was important for my work because it strengthened my notion of Africa as an extension into the Caribbean." Interview with Erika Smilowitz, The Caribbean Writer, Volume Five: Interviews, St. Croix, 26 Feb 1991.

4 In the Caribbean, the incongruities between writing and orality also involve many points of contestation: biases of literate cultures that privilege writing as progress, the historical withholding of literacy during slavery as well as problematic notions of reclaiming oral folk culture by literate Caribbean intelligentsia.

5 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty's major work, Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962)

6 See Sophocles, Philoctetes trans. E. H. Plumptre (1867), Literature Online U of Montana Lib., 5 March 2006 <<http://lion.chadwyck.com.weblib.lib.umt.edu>>.

7 In Sacred Possessions, Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert write, "The Obeah-man and Obeah-woman played a prominent role in Caribbean slave societies from the earliest days of the sugar plantations in the West Indies; they functioned as community leaders and repositories of the African folk's cultural heritage" (6).

8 Obeah's power can either heal or harm, thus Loretta Collins reminds us that "her very name, Ma Kil(l) man, suggests one of the most effective uses of obeah during the times of slavery" (151).

9 Maroon Nanny appears in the fiction of Michelle Cliff, No Telephone To Heaven (New York: Dutton, 1987); in Maryse Condé, I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem, Trans. Richard Philcox (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1992); and also Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea (New York: Norton, 1967).

10 George Handley describes Walcott's environmental activism for St. Lucia in his article, "Derek Walcott's Poetics of the Environment in The Bounty" Callaloo 28 (2005): 201-215, Project Muse, U of Montana Lib., 12 March 2006 <<http://muse.jhu.edu.weblib.lib.umt.edu>>. He tells us that Hilton built the Jalousie Resort and Spa between the Pitons in the early 1990's. Sadly, "Instead of buying the once privately owned land so as to establish a national park, the government allowed the land to be sold to Hilton where now only residents of

this very exclusive spa, typically foreigners visiting the Caribbean, are allowed entrance. This was despite the fact that an environmental impact study recommended against the construction of the spa. Tragically, archaeological artifacts were destroyed in the construction. Walcott vehemently protested the building of the spa, which earned him criticism from many of the local working class who viewed the development as a much-needed economic opportunity. He and the others who joined to form the St. Lucia Environmental Awareness Council were cast as 'Johnnie-come-latelies,' outsiders who merely wanted the mountains for their own privileged pleasure."

11 Refer to their extensive comparative findings in Albert Lord, The Singer of Tales (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1960) and Adam Parry, ed., The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971).

12 Both Abram and Ong describe sound as intrinsic to human communication. Abram argues, "It is this expressive potency--the soundful influence of spoken words upon the sensing body--that supports all the more abstract and conventional meanings that we assign to those words" (79).

13 Ong suggests that "the phenomenology of sound enters deeply into human beings' feel for existence, as processed by the spoken word. For the way in which the word is processed is always momentous in psychic life. The centering action of sound (the field of sound is not spread out before me but is all around me) affects man's sense of the cosmos" (73).

14 “The Army feared that the religious revival would lead to an armed uprising among the Lakota, many of whom were dissatisfied with recent land cessions that the government had negotiated with them. Rumors circulated that Sitting Bull would use the Ghost Dance as a cover for organizing a final military stand against the certainty of white incursion into Lakota territory” (Elliot 205).

15 An Adamic sense of naming also reflects oral perception. “Oral peoples commonly think of names (one kind of words) as conveying power over things. Explanations of Adam’s naming of the animals in Genesis 2:20 usually call condescending attention to this presumably quaint archaic belief,” Ong tells us. In his view, names *do* grant power in both oral and scribal cultures. Naming enables one to accumulate knowledge, “without learning a vast store of names, one is simply powerless to understand, for example, chemistry. And so with all other intellectual knowledge” (24).

16 In contrast with the codified, though slippery, definitions used in a grapholect, oral cultures can do just fine without them. “Oral cultures of course have no dictionaries and few semantic discrepancies. The meaning of each word is controlled by what Goody and Watt call ‘direct semantic ratification’, that is, by the real-life situations in which the word is used here and now. The oral mind is uninterested in definitions. Words acquire their meaning only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal inflections, facial expressions, and the

entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs.

Word meanings come continually out of the present" (Ong 47).

17 St. Lucia moved toward Independence for decades. Universal adult suffrage began in 1951 and self-government started with the West Indies Act of 1967.

18 See Franz Fanon, Black skin, White Masks (New York: Grove Press, 1991, c1967).

Works Cited

- Abram, David. The Spell of the Sensuous. New York: Vintage, 1997.
- Bakhtin, M.M.. The Dialogic Imagination. Austin: UT Press, 1981.
- Best, Curwen. Culture @ the Cutting Edge: Tracking Caribbean Popular Music.
Jamaica: U of the West Indies P, 2004.
- Brathwaite, Kamau. History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language
in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry. London: New Beacon Books, 1984.
- Breiner, Laurence. "Creole Language in the Poetry of Derek Walcott." Callaloo 28
(2005): 29-41. Project Muse. U Montana Lib. 2 Feb 2006
<<http://www.muse.jhu.edu>>.
- Breslin, Paul. Rev. of Omeros, by Derek Walcott. Literary Encyclopedia 11
March 2006 <<http://www.litencyc.com>>.
- Collins, Loretta. "'We Shall All Heal': Ma Kilman, the Obeah Woman, as
Mother-Healer in Derek Walcott's Omeros." Literature and Medicine 14
(1995): 146-62. Project Muse. U Montana Lib. 2 April 2005
<<http://www.muse.jhu.edu>>.
- Cornford, Adam. "Cosmology: Intelligence and Infinity in Language."
Millenium: A Topology. The Alterran Poetry Assemblage. 7 April 2006
<<http://ca.geocities.com>>.

- Elliott, Michael. "Ethnography, Reform, and the Problem of the Real: James Mooney's Ghost-Dance Religion." American Quarterly 50.2 (1998): 201-233
U of Montana Lib. Project Muse. 2 Dec 2005
<<http://www.muse.jhu.edu>>.
- Gates, Henry Louis. "The Promise of Freedom." African American Lives. PBS.
KSPS, Spokane. 8 Feb 2006.
- Glissant, Edouard. Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays. Charlottesville:
Virginia UP, 1989.
- Hall, Stuart. Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies. Ed. Morley,
David and Kuan-Hsing Chen. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Hamner, Robert D. Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's Omeros.
Columbia: Missouri UP, 1997.
- Lesser, Alexander. "Cultural Significance of the Ghost Dance." American
Anthropologist 35 (1933): 108-115. JSTOR. U of Montana Lib. 10 Dec
2005. <<http://links.jstor.org>>.
- Lord, Albert. The Singer of Tales. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1960.
- Okpewho, Isidore. "Walcott, Homer, and the 'Black Atlantic.'" Research in
African Literatures 33 (2002): 27-44.
- Olmos, Margarite and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, ed. Sacred Possessions:
Vodou, Santeria, Obeah and the Caribbean. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers
UP, 1997.
- Ong, Walter. Orality and Literacy. London: Methuen, 1982.

Reimer, Eric. "Sea of History, Sea of Stories: Piroguing with Derek Walcott and Salman Rushdie." MA Thesis. U of Montana, 1996.

Rushdie, Salman. Interview with Rani Dube. "Salman Rushdie." Salman Rushdie Interviews: A Sourcebook of His Ideas. Ed. Pradyumna S. Chauhan. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001.

Scanlon, Mara. "'In the Mouths of the Tribe': Omeros and the Heteroglossic Nation." Bucknell Review 43 (2000): 100-117.

Terada, Rei. Derek Walcott's Poetry. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1992.

Walcott, Derek. "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott. Ed. Robert Hamner. Boulder: Rienner, 1997.

---. Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays. New York: Farrar, 1970.

---. "A Far Cry from Africa." Collected Poems: 1948-1984. New York: Farrar, 1986.

---. "The Ghost Dance." Walker and the Ghost Dance. New York: Farrar, 2002.

---. "The Muse of History." What the Twilight Says. New York: Farrar, 1998.

Contemporary Literature 20 (1979): 279-92.

---. Interview. "The Poet as Painter: Nobel Prize-winner Derek Walcott Talks About His Life and Work." By Paul Grondahl. Albany Times Union 8 Nov 1988.

---. Omeros. New York: Farrar, 1990.

---. What the Twilight Says. New York: Farrar, 1998.

Warner, Keith Q. Kaiso! the Trinidad calypso: A Study of the Calypso as Oral Literature. Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1982.